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**Imagining Afghanistan
British Foreign Policy and the Afghan Polity, 18081878**

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Imagining Afghanistan:
British Foreign Policy and the Afghan Polity, 1808-1878

Martin J. Bayly

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in International Relations
Department of War Studies, King's College London

Table of Contents

Abstract	4
Acknowledgements	5
Note on Transliterations and Archival References	8
Glossary	10
Chapter One	13
Introduction.....	13
Imagining Afghanistan: The Lasting Influence of Image, Narrative, and Myth ..	18
Beyond the ‘Great Game’: Recovering Afghanistan’s Imperial Encounter	21
Relocating the History.....	28
Disciplinary Importance: International Relations, Imperial History and Afghanistan.....	36
Methods and Approaches: An Agnostic Constructivism	41
Knowledge.....	43
Policy	47
Exception	48
Conclusion	50
Chapter Two.....	51
Early European Explorers and the Afghanistan Knowledge Community ...	51
Part One: Early European Explorers of Afghanistan	54
Approaches to Colonial Knowledge	54
The Cultural World of Early Afghanistan Explorers	57
Intellectual Worlds	66
Practical Worlds	69
Conclusion: A Knowledge Community?.....	74
Part Two: Knowledge Entrepreneurs	76
Mountstuart Elphinstone and The ‘Elphinstonian Episteme’	76
Alexander Burnes.....	93
Charles Masson	104
Conclusion: Contextualizing Early European Explorers and the Afghanistan ‘Knowledge Community’	114
Chapter Three	117
Afghanistan as a Policy Problem: Towards the First Anglo-Afghan War ..	117
Anatomy of a Policy Making Process: The Institutional Context.....	122
The Narrative Form of the Russian Menace	125
A Strategy of Influence: Trade and Commerce.....	132
Prelude to an Intervention: Shah Shuja and the 1834 Expedition.....	138
The Ascendency of Dost Muhammad Khan	145
British Perceptions	148
Policy and Territory: Imagining Afghanistan as a Territorial Unit.....	150
Policy Closure at Simla: The Policy Instantiation of the ‘Idea’ of Afghanistan	163
Conclusion: Afghanistan as a Policy Problem	173

Chapter Four	175
The Era of Exception: Anglo-Afghan Relations After the First Anglo-Afghan War.....	175
Part One - Anglo-Afghan Relations During the Second Reign of Dost Muhammad Khan	180
The First Anglo-Afghan War and its Aftermath	180
The Emergence of a Violent Geography	187
Great Power Management and Regional Diplomacy	190
'Sullen quiescence': Anglo-Afghan Relations 1842-52.....	199
Overcoming Exception 1853-1857.....	207
Non-Intervention and the Bellew and Lumsden Mission 1857	215
Conclusion: Part I - Anglo-Afghan Relations During the Second Reign of Dost Muhammad Khan	222
Part II - The Era of Frontier Management: Towards the Second Anglo-Afghan War, 1857-1878.....	224
Sentiment and 'Science': The Frontier State of Mind.....	224
British Frontier Policy During the Afghan Civil War	231
The Frontier Debate Takes Off, 1874-78	240
Lord Lytton and the Second Anglo-Afghan War	249
Conclusion: The Era of Exception	257
Chapter Five	260
Conclusion	260
Bibliography	272
Appendix 1: Afghanistan's Ethnic Groups.....	285
Appendix 2: Tribal Structure of The Pashtun Ethnic Group.....	286
Appendix 3: European Explorers of Afghanistan, 1793-1839	287
Appendix 4: European Explorers of Afghanistan 1843-1878	289
Appendix 5: The Elphinstone Map	290
Appendix 6: The Arrowsmith Map	291

Abstract

This thesis seeks to provide a cultural history of Anglo-Afghan relations during the nineteenth century. Specifically, it explores the manner in which British perceptions of Afghanistan provided the understandings that guided policy decisions. These understandings did not consist purely of ideas driven by strategic logic. Rather, throughout the nineteenth century, building on the initial works of European travelers, the British developed, refined, and acted upon an amorphous and contested 'idea' of Afghanistan; one that was more than simply the function of great power geopolitics. The sources informing this imagined entity were cultural, intellectual, moral, political, and social-scientific, as much as they were emotional. It was an idea, or collection of ideas, that would evolve and become trammelled by events, and ultimately leave a legacy that persists to this day. This thesis aims to make two contributions: firstly, to recover Anglo-Afghan relations from a historiography dominated by great power relations, specifically Anglo-Russian relations and the 'great game'. Secondly, to contribute to the wider debate on the contributions that imperial history can offer to the International Relations discipline.

The thesis develops in three sections. The first section examines how British official knowledge of Afghanistan was constructed through the experience of early British explorers and their published travel accounts, focusing in particular on the works of Mountstuart Elphinstone, Alexander Burnes, and Charles Masson. The second section looks at how key policy decisions leading to the first Anglo-Afghan war were shaped by the knowledge provided by an Afghanistan 'knowledge community'. The third section on 'exception' considers the impact of the first Anglo-Afghan war on diplomatic relations, and charts the emergence of a particular 'idea' of Afghanistan mediated by the intellectual and cultural influences of a particular frontier mentality.

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This PhD thesis has evolved significantly from its original form and has gathered many debts along the way. In particular I would like to thank Theo Farrell, who has supervised this thesis throughout and has been a constant, unwavering source of support, guidance, and encouragement. I am indebted to him not just for his professionalism and generosity with his time, but also for his endless good humour, optimism, and enthusiasm. His approach to supervision represents everything that is good about doctoral study and I have learned a huge amount under his guidance. Huw Bennett has also been a valuable source of guidance and encouragement, even prior to my arrival at King's, and I thank him for his support. I would like to thank the Defence Studies Department, who funded this PhD, and particularly Matt Uttley for this opportunity. My PhD colleagues at King's College London have been a much-needed source of inspiration, as well as moral support. It has been a privilege working with them. In particular (yet in no particular order) I would like to thank, David Parker, Ayesha Siddiqi, Dan Whittingham, Mike Martin, Chris Sims, Mark Beaument, Alex Strick Van Linschoten, Deedee Derksen, Francis Grice, Olivier Schmitt, Avinash Paliwal, Ian Bowers, and the 'New Cheshire Cheese' crew (you know who you are). The speakers and attendees at the Afghanistan Studies Group have also contributed much to my thinking, I have benefitted immensely from their insights. The staff at both the Department of War Studies and the Defence Studies Department have also been a great source of help. I'd particularly like to thank Jonathan Krause for the pep talks, as well as Mervyn Frost, Rudra Chaudhuri, Jayne Peake, Helen Bhandari, Lynda Hobbs, and Sarah Somers.

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Bayly, whose constant interest and encouragement I will always miss. Although she never got the chance to read the first work of yet another 'bloody expert', she was instrumental in his emergence.

Martin J. Bayly, Delhi, 2013

Note on Transliterations and Archival References

In dealing with transliterations I borrow from other works in striking a compromise between the demands of consistency, convention, simplicity, literacy and closeness to spoken language.¹ People, place names, ethnic groups, tribal groupings, *et cetera* therefore adhere to conventional transliterations (e.g. Afghan, not Afghaun, or Affghan; Kabul, not Caubul, Cabool, or Kaubul; Kandahar, not Candahar or Qandahar; Pashtun not Pushtoon, Pashtoon). In terms of nationality I utilize those forms familiar to the historical context to which I am referring, hence, 'Afghan' when referring to the post-independence period can be taken as referring to a national of that territory, whereas prior to independence it generally referred only to those inhabiting the southern belt of what is today 'Afghanistan', in other words the largely Pashtun tribes stretching from Kabul, through Kandahar to Herat. Likewise, 'Persian' or 'Persia' is used when referring to the nineteenth century, but 'Iranian' or 'Iran' today. When quoting others I have left the transliterations as per the original.

The archival references have been recorded in order to best allow for their location in the archives. Accordingly, in the case of India Office Material I have provided the classmark first. This is the reference that would be inputted into the data catalogue for the purposes of retrieval (omitting 'IOR' or 'BL'). The precise detail on where to find the specific archive within the given collection is then provided. Where there is no clear title to the particular archive I have provided a description without inverted commas. In the case of material drawn from the National Archives of India, where possible I have adopted the 'subject' and topic line as per the reference guides. For example, 'Afghanistan: Papers relating to the affairs of' would be found in the reference guide under 'A' for Afghanistan. The department and consultation section are also provided. Two versions of Elphinstone's *An*

¹ Richard Tapper (ed.), *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan* (London: Croom Helm, 1983).

Account of the Kingdom of Caubul have been consulted (the second edition of 1819, and the third edition of 1842) these are distinguished in the footnotes.

Glossary

<i>akhbar</i>	newspaper
<i>akhbarat</i>	newsletter
<i>angrez</i>	English
<i>Barakzai</i>	Sub-tribe of the Zirak branch of the Durrani tribal confederation.
<i>cafila/kafila</i>	caravan, a long-distance conveyance of goods
<i>cossid/kassid</i>	messenger, a runner, or post-carrier (often of 'intelligence')
<i>dak</i>	post, conveyance of mail or people
<i>darbar</i>	court of government
<i>Durrani</i>	Tribal confederation of Pashtun tribes under the dynasty of Ahmad Shah, the first ruler of the Kingdom of Kabul from 1747.
<i>elchi</i>	envoy
<i>feringhi</i>	foreigner (generally European)
<i>ghairilaqa</i>	unadministered territory
<i>ghazi</i>	holy warrior
<i>haukim/hakam</i>	governor
<i>harkara</i>	an intelligence agent
<i>hamsaya</i>	(<i>humasauyehs</i>) literally: shade sharing; neighbourliness (towards minority groups)
<i>Khorassan</i>	A Persian historical region encompassing the north-east of modern day Iran, western Afghanistan and parts of Central Asia
<i>Kuzilbash</i>	see 'qizilbash'
<i>lakh</i>	South Asian numerical unit equivalent to 100,000
<i>Lohani</i>	Nomadic merchant group of Afghans, believed to descend from a group of Shepherd herders from Ghor, East of Herat.

<i>munshi</i>	secretary
<i>nawab</i>	deputy; quasi-Royal title.
<i>nuzzerana</i>	A form of political tribute through monetary means.
<i>oolooss/oolus/wulus</i>	Understood by early European explorers of Afghanistan as equivalent to 'tribe' but in fact linguistically encompassing 'nation', and 'relatives'.
<i>ooloossee</i>	a general rising of the <i>oolooss</i>
<i>Padshah</i>	Persian honourific meaning 'King'
<i>Pakhtunwali</i>	Pakhtun tribal code
<i>Pashtun</i>	Principal ethnic group of Afghanistan
<i>Pathan</i>	British colonial-era neologism encompassing the Pakhtun and Pushtun people of Afghanistan and northern Pakistan.
<i>pir</i>	muslim Sufi spiritual guide
<i>qawm</i>	people, tribe, community (See Wulus, Tyfah)
<i>qizilbash</i>	Personal bodyguards of the founder of the Durrani Empire, Ahmad Shah and later a principal military contingent of succeeding Afghan rulers.
<i>saiyid</i>	a descendent of the Prophet
<i>Saddozai</i>	Sub-tribe of the Zirak branch of the Durrani tribal confederation.
<i>shura</i>	consultation/council
<i>sirdar</i>	Military title held by heads of Durrani clans during Saddozai era, referring to all male members of the Royal family during the Muhammadzai (Barakzai) era.
<i>tiyul</i>	land granted in return for military service
<i>tyfah</i>	clan, tribe, group (see wulus, qawm)
<i>vakil</i>	official envoy to a foreign court
<i>wulus (oolus)</i>	nation, tribe, relatives (see qawm, tyfah)

yaghi

rebel/rebellion

yaghistan

literally 'land of the rebels'.

Chapter One

Introduction

In 1783 a servant of the East India Company, George Forster journeyed across Afghanistan on his way from Bengal to England. Forster's trip was the first of many to follow as a succession of British and European explorers ventured across the 'land of the Afghans', recording their travels, and contributing to a vision of Afghanistan that would provide the intellectual universe upon which British officials would draw to guide their policy decisions throughout the nineteenth century.¹ Collectively, these works and the travels they narrated provide the overture to more than a century of direct, if spasmodic, British involvement with its frontier in India. In Afghanistan, this encounter would be defined by periodic bouts of engagement and retrenchment, each time warping, and forcing a reappraisal of such works as part of a pool of understanding, a pool that was gradually expanded, but frequently retrograde in its character. Like waves crashing on the shore, British engagement in Afghanistan advanced and retreated, and twice during the nineteenth century resulted in war.²

What follows is an attempt to provide a cultural history of Anglo-Afghan diplomatic relations between 1809-1878. I use this terminology advisedly. The aim here is not to essentialize culture, or to reduce it to an explanatory variable, but rather to explore the manner in which British perceptions of Afghanistan provided the understandings that guided them to policy

¹ For a list of these individuals see Appendices 3 and 4.

² The First Anglo-Afghan War took place between 1838-1842 (though troops did not cross into Afghanistan till 1839), the Second Anglo-Afghan War occurred between 1878-1880. The First Anglo-Afghan war was effectively two invasions. The British were forced to withdraw in 1841 and in response to this heavy defeat sent forth an 'army of retribution' that finally withdrew in 1842. Some accounts thus refer to the Anglo-Afghan 'wars' when describing what is more commonly known as the first Anglo-Afghan war.

decisions. These understandings, I argue, did not consist purely of ideas driven by strategic logic. Throughout the nineteenth century, building on the initial works of European travelers, the British developed, refined, and acted upon an amorphous and contested 'idea' of Afghanistan; one that was more than simply the function of great power geopolitics. The sources informing this imagined entity were cultural, intellectual, moral, political, and social-scientific, as much as they were emotional. It was an idea, or collection of ideas, that would evolve and become trammled by events, and ultimately leave a legacy that persists to this day.

This is the story that has two interwoven aspects; one based on knowledge, and the other based on sentiment. The first is the story of the formation and evolution of a colonial knowledge community. This story begins in chapter two and focuses on the build up of this knowledge prior to the first Anglo-Afghan war. It is a study of the emergence of a body of experts and their works, and how this knowledge became translated into policy and practice. This translation into policy is the subject of chapter three which looks at how this knowledge was applied in the policies that led to the first Anglo-Afghan war. As such, it is argued, the 'idea of Afghanistan' had a demonstrable impact on the manner in which Britain engaged with the country itself. However, the story is not one of straightforward translation from knowledge to practice. In their quest to understand, influence, and ultimately subjugate the Afghan strategic space to their own ends, British officials were forced to distill and codify this growing body of work into a digestible abstracted form. This process not only elided the complexities of the Afghan political community, but forced moments of 'closure'³ around key definitions and representations as complex understandings were simplified for policy ingestion. As such, this is as much the story of 'unlearning' Afghanistan, as it is story of 'learning' about the country. This was a process of converting of what Bernard Cohn has described as the investigative modalities of colonial knowledge into a

³ Jan Golinski, *Making Natural Knowledge: Constructivism and the History of Science* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998).

'policy science for the powerful'.⁴ Afghanistan thus became beholden to a concentrated and partial knowledge order, one that shut down latitude in interpretation and became hostage to historical fortune. In effect then, this is the story of how a colonial state both sees and does not see; a process which as Priya Satia has observed is 'intricately bound up with cultural history'.⁵

Whilst this process of closure rigidified the parameters within which Afghanistan was imagined, the process of imagining did not stop. As chapter four argues, following the First Anglo-Afghan war the idea of Afghanistan took on new forms and acquired new meanings. During this period we witness a greater role for the second aspect to this story, one that is more emotional, sentimental, and imaginative in its form. It is the story of the partial and spasmodic investigation of a space that both enchanted and terrified. Imagining a strategic space to which they had precious little access, the British relied on a cocktail of representational criteria. They increasingly viewed Afghanistan as a security threat, not only due to fears of Russian activity, but due to their own sense of cognitive and ontological unease with a space that became subsumed under a particular 'violent geography',⁶ and a people who frequently fell under the rubric of 'tribals', 'fanatics'; 'intriguers'; and 'militants'. Following the Anglo-Afghan War, Afghanistan was effectively closed off for European explorers and officials, and became defined by a peculiar form of imagined knowledge: a cartography of danger and exclusion, as Afghan society began to be viewed through British encounters with the communities on the north-west frontier of India.

Meanwhile, the 'idea of Afghanistan' was swept up into a wider logic of imperial thought. Afghanistan's exclusion from empire became justified not simply on normative grounds, but on legal grounds too as colonial knowledge

⁴ Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Tarak Barkawi, 'Empire and Order in International Relations and Security Studies' in Robert A. Denemark (ed.), *The International Studies Encyclopedia, Vol. III* (Chichester: Wiley- Blackwell, 2010), 1360.

⁵ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1999); Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East*, (Oxford: OUP, 2008).

⁶ Derek Gregory and Allan Pred (eds.), *Violent Geographies: Fear, Terror, and Political Violence* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007).

was used to sustain the portrayal of an 'uncivilized', 'outlaw state';⁷ one beyond the pale of standard diplomatic intercourse. At the same time, the bureaucratizing processes that paralleled an increasingly assertive military presence on the frontier provided a panacea to this state of unknowing, reducing Afghanistan to a problem of military science. Whereas previously the idea of Afghanistan was an idea dominated by the works of European explorers, and company men, a new 'epistemic community' began to capture the definition of the problem. This capture was incomplete however. Although the period is frequently described in terms of competing notions of imperial defence, there was nuance within this debate. What is more, there were those voices that continued to advocate a policy of political engagement, once more activating the cultural canon of European Afghanistan 'expertise'.

Partly as a reflection of the influence on British thinking of their own culturally contingent intellectual fashions, and partly due to the simple lack of 'time on the ground', the British were often apt to see Afghans and Afghanistan through a glass darkly. This was either in loosely defined abstract terms based on often-outdated, patchy empirics; through unrefined stereotypes that barely pretended to be based on anything more than conjecture; or through sterile concepts such as the 'scientific' theories relating to imperial defence. As such, the two aspects of this story, which can be described as the academic and the imaginative, (to borrow from Said),⁸ never travelled alone. Whilst one occasionally took precedence over the other, in many ways they were two sides of the same coin, mutually sustaining, feeding off, and interacting with each other.

The British Empire's periodic forays into Afghanistan rendered their encounters with the country both partial and spasmodic. Each intervention brought with it a scramble for knowledge and information, but a scramble

⁷ Gerrit Gong, *The Standard of 'Civilization' in International Society*; Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States* (Oxford: OUP, 1984).

⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 2. Said identifies a third form of 'Orientalism', that of the 'corporate institution for dealing with the Orient' (*ibid*, 2). This institution forms the primary subject of his study. As I outline in further detail in chapter two, this work does not take an avowedly Orientalist approach, but I do borrow from Said's work.

inevitably dominated by the prevailing policy themes of the day. Whenever the creaking information networks and knowledge communities were put into action, they were immediately infected by the sclerotic tendencies of a policy centre urging their own definition of the problem on their agents. This was not so much 'covert'⁹ or 'informal' empire,¹⁰ as incompetent empire or tendentious empire. When the next intervention came along, as it did 36 years after the end of the First Anglo-Afghan War, the Afghan context had changed radically, but the colonial lens had become further tainted by the legacy of this long period of partial engagement. In their quest to render Afghanistan legible, the British continually forgot their own authorship of the world.¹¹

This thesis is not simply a study of Anglo-Afghan relations in the nineteenth century, but is an attempt to explore the manner in which states and their agencies attempt to comprehend regions that they consider to be unfamiliar, threatening, or incomprehensible. It is a study into the processes through which that considered 'strange' is rendered 'familiar'. It is suggested that this is a cultural phenomenon concerning knowledge, society, and the sociology of knowledge. This study places us not only on the frontiers of colonial imagination, but also on the frontiers of thought in the International Relations (IR) discipline. It challenges comfortable assumptions pertaining to notions of 'state', 'sovereignty', 'territory', and 'identity', considering how this terminology may be contingent on a social, historical, and political context, rather than reducible to generic abstracted ideal-types. As such, this thesis also challenges the comfortable position that IR has tended to take with respect to its use of history – particularly imperial history. What Jonathan B. Isacoff terms the 'historical imagination' of IR,¹² has often been driven by the IR discipline itself rather than by any attempt to consider its correspondence

⁹ Satia, *Spies in Arabia*.

¹⁰ C. R. Fay, 'The Movement Towards Free Trade, 1820-1853', in J. Holland et al (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the British Empire, Volume II: The Growth of the New Empire 1783-1870* (Cambridge: CUP, 1968), 399.

¹¹ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 86.

¹² Jonathan B. Isacoff, 'On the Historical Imagination of International Relations: The Case for a 'Deweyan Reconstruction'', *Millennium*, 31/3 (2002), 603-26.

to historical reality. In taking a more questioning attitude towards that discipline, and taking a more inclusive approach to the history upon which the discipline is built, this thesis aims to explore new frontiers.

Imagining Afghanistan: The Lasting Influence of Image, Narrative, and Myth

All geographic spaces must acquire an attached meaning structure; spaces can rarely simply 'be', they must represent something or a collection of things. All geographies are thus to an extent 'imagined', and such imaginings are generally subjective appraisals. Geopolitics is in part the study of the 'spatialization' of international politics 'in such a way as to represent a 'world' characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas'; a process frequently carried out by 'core powers or hegemonic states'.¹³ As part of this spatialization there is, John Agnew notes, a tendency to essentialize, exoticize, and totalize, geographical space.¹⁴ In the modern setting such tendencies have given rise to what Simon Dalby terms 'tabloid realism', the 'presentation of the world in terms of dangerous places and the ever-present threat of violence'.¹⁵ This 'cartography of danger' he argues has been particularly associated with the US War on Terror. Imagined geographies often cluster around binary narratives, of 'our' territory and 'theirs', often springing from a particular 'heartland' or 'homeland' mentality.¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, such narratives are particularly prevalent when it comes to frontiers - areas that have historically preoccupied empires. As Manan Ahmed observes, '[t]o the centre of any empire the frontier is a site of anxiety, of potential harm, of

¹³ Gearóid Ó Tuathail and John Agnew, 'Geopolitics and discourse: Practical geopolitical reasoning in American foreign policy', *Political Geography*, 11/2 (1992), 192; Gearóid Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics*, (London: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁴ John Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-visioning world politics*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 1998), 36.

¹⁵ Simon Dalby, 'The Pentagon's New Imperial Cartography: Tabloid Realism and the War on Terror', in Derek Gregory and Allan Pred (eds) *Violent Geographies: Fear, Terror, and Political Violence* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), 255-72; Malcolm Anderson, *Frontiers: Territory and State Formation in the Modern World*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 295-308.

¹⁶ Matthew Farish, 'Targeting the Inner Landscape' in Derek Gregory and Allan Pred (eds) *Violent Geographies: Fear, Terror, and Political Violence* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), 255-72; Malcolm Anderson, *Frontiers: Territory and State Formation in the Modern World*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

barbarians who could be marching towards the gate'.¹⁷ Given what critical geopolitics and frontier studies suggest, it is perhaps equally unsurprising that Afghanistan is often subject to particular narrative renderings. Afghanistan is frequently cast as a 'violent geography'; a 'black world'¹⁸ caught between manifest destiny and oblivion; paradoxically at the confluence of the 'knowable' – of civilizations, empires, nation-states, or societies – and yet resembling a land of the 'unknowable', of 'wild tribes', nefarious actors; a domain of rumour, intrigue, and violence.¹⁹

Such spaces have regularly found their way into popular culture. In literature, the Nobel Prize winning author J. M. Coetzee's portrayal of imperial paranoia in *Waiting for the Barbarians* provides a chilling allegory on metropolitan fear of uprisings from the unknown wild beyond. James Michener's 1963 novel *Caravans*, applies such thinking to Afghanistan, when an American damsel goes missing in Afghanistan and is recovered by a dashing American serviceman. *The New York Times* described it as '[a]n extraordinary novel' in which the 'mountains sing and the deserts writhe in a kind of spasmodic horror of deathlessness'. *The Minneapolis Tribune* hailed an 'imaginative journey to a barbarous land little changed in centuries'.²⁰ This denial of historical progress, an equally popular trope in such representations, was famously and controversially reprised by the former British Defence Secretary Liam Fox who in 2010 described Afghanistan as a 'broken 13th century country'.²¹ Such representations exhibit a powerful and enduring

¹⁷ Manan Ahmad, 'Adam's Mirror: The Frontier in the Imperial Imagination', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLVI/13 (2001), 60. See also, Anderson, *Frontiers*.

¹⁸ Trevor Paglen, 'Groom Lake and the Imperial Production of Nowhere' in Derek Gregory and Allan Pred (eds) *Violent Geographies: Fear, Terror, and Political Violence* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), 237-54. Paglen refers to a secret weapons testing site in the Nevada desert, formerly an Indian reserve before being swallowed up by the advancing American frontier. As he describes it, this space remained 'a swath of uncharted land, a blank space on the map, a space in the crosshairs of manifest destiny, a space that stunk of death' (p. 244). The description is reminiscent of the manner in which Afghanistan has occasionally been portrayed.

¹⁹ See Ahmed, 'Adam's Mirror: The Frontier in the Imperial Imagination'. See also Benjamin Hopkins and Magnus Marsden, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier* (London: Hurst, 2011).

²⁰ James A. Michener, *Caravans* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1963).

²¹ The comment unsurprisingly provoked a furious response from the Karzai administration. David Batty, 'Liam Fox calls for faster UK troop withdrawal from Afghanistan', *Guardian.co.uk*, (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/may/22/liam-fox-troop-withdrawal-afghanistan>, 22 May, 2010); Tom Coghlan, 'Afghans accuse Defence Secretary Liam Fox of

cultural presence partially reflected in a curious nostalgia for imperial derring-do during the 'great game' in Central Asia. Once again, popular culture has played its part as with the famously jingoistic exploits of the fictional antihero Captain Flashman, whose career begins in the first Anglo-Afghan war. Since 2001 the shelves of bookshops have groaned under the weight of new publications on Afghanistan, frequently alluding to its history as the venue of great power competition, imperial rivalries and intrigue, and a domain of violence, terrorism, and insurgency.

For the British in India, their century-long experience of policing the frontier from the annexation of the Punjab in 1849, to partition and Indian independence in 1947 perpetuated a certain frontier mentality. Indeed, it is arguably this prolonged British encounter with such 'wild tribes' that promoted the most enduring – and most misleading – stereotypes of the Afghans.²² Engaging with these groups prompted the emergence too of new class of colonial hero, the man of the frontier, eulogized by such colonial luminaries as Olaf Caroe, and George Curzon, and providing the antithesis to the 'wild' Pathan.²³ Whilst these stereotypes, and their progenitors have been well covered in the literature, less attention has been paid to the impact these imaginative and bureaucratic processes had on the manner in which British officials engaged with the government on the other side of the mountains in Kabul. The idea of Afghanistan became partially filtered through this volatile relationship, as improving relations with other regional political entities further cast Afghanistan in a relatively exceptional light.

racism and disrespect', *The Times*,

(<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article7134622.ece>, 24 May, 2010).

²² Mukulika Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed* (Karachi: OUP, 2000); Charles Lindholm, 'Images of the Pathan: The Usefulness of Colonial Ethnography', *European Journal of Sociology*, 21/2 (1980), 350-61; John Anderson, 'Poetics and Politics in Ethnographic Texts: A View from the Colonial Ethnography of Afghanistan' in Richard Harvey Brown (ed.), *Writing the Social Text: Poetics and Politics in Social Science Discourse* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), 91-116; Hopkins and Marsden, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*; Christine Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir Dost Muhammad Khan (1826-1863)* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997), xv.

²³ Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans: 550 B.C. – A.D. 1957*, (Karachi: OUP, 2011), 332-45; Curzon, George N., 'Text of the 1907 Romanes Lecture on the Subject of Frontiers', (<http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/ibru/resources/links/curzon.pdf>).

In the contemporary setting, Afghanistan has once more acquired a particular image as a domain of violence and great power failure. Rory Stewart, drawing on his own experience as a European Afghanistan-explorer, turned policy advisor (turned Conservative MP), noted this trend in 2009 when he wrote '[w]e are accustomed to seeing Afghans through bars, or smeared windows, or the sight of a rifle: turbaned men carrying rockets, praying in unison, or lying in pools of blood; boys squabbling in an empty swimming-pool; women in burn wards, or begging in *burqas*.'²⁴ Perhaps this is a perception that is beginning to change, but such representations are never far away. As international troops withdraw from Afghanistan, a degree of soul-searching has crept in over the failings of America's 'longest war', and the international community's largest post-Cold War state-building project, there is a temptation to reach back into history and find parallels, or to look for excuses elsewhere.²⁵ Afghanistan is once again in danger of being defined in terms of its history as it arrives at a critical juncture.

It is a key contention of this thesis that these representations have a history, and moreover, that they have at times given licence to policy decisions, and have been perpetuated by those policy decisions too. But accessing this first requires overcoming certain tendencies within parts of the existing literature.

Beyond the 'Great Game': Recovering Afghanistan's Imperial Encounter

A key aim of this thesis is to recover Afghanistan's imperial encounter from what can be described as the oblivion of great power politics. Historical

²⁴ Rory Stewart, 'The Irresistible Illusion', *London Review of Books*, 31/13, (9 July, 2009), 3-6. Available online: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n13/rory-stewart/the-irresistible-illusion>.

²⁵ For a similar observation, and an example see: Myra MacDonald, 'Do you think Afghanistan hasn't changed since 1842?', *Reuters*, (<http://blogs.reuters.com/pakistan/2012/03/20/do-you-think-afghanistan-hasnt-changed-since-1842/>, March 20, 2012); The Editors, 'Despair and Necessity in Afghanistan', *The National Review*, (<http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/293834/despair-and-necessity-afghanistan-editors>, March 20 2012).

accounts have tended to prioritize Anglo-Russian rivalry and war, generally with the former leading to the latter. The key trope in this 'master narrative' is the overwhelming presence of the 'great game' thesis, one which prioritizes Anglo-Russian rivalry as an explanatory factor.²⁶ The aim of this work is not to wish away the history of this rivalry, but rather to remove it from the centre of analysis. The problem here is not one of fact, but of emphasis. The reasoning for this will be discussed, but in the first instance it is worth considering where the 'great game' narrative comes from, and why it has proven so stubborn, particularly given that the term is practically non-existent in the archives.

The phrase 'great game' has been routinely deployed in key texts covering the history of Central Asia during the nineteenth century; the most recent and famous of which is probably Peter Hopkirk's work *The Great Game*.²⁷ Hopkirk acquired the phrase himself from a succession of historians who have borrowed from two sources. First, Rudyard Kipling, whose famous novel *Kim* immortalized the phrase in literary form; and second John Kaye, whose three-volume account of the First Anglo-Afghan War dominated the historiography for decades.²⁸ His use of the terminology in chapter two of the second volume appears to be no more than an affectation, and one that was not meant to capture Anglo-Russian competition, so much as the processes by which British India could persuade, cajole, and coerce its frontier regions

²⁶ Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, 'Shah Shuja's 'Hidden History' and its Implications for the Historiography of Afghanistan', *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], (May 2012). Available online: <http://samaj.revues.org/3384>; Benjamin Hopkins, 'The Myth of the 'Great Game': The Anglo-Sikh alliance and rivalry', *Centre of South Asian Studies Occasional Paper*, No 5, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2004); James Hevia, *The Imperial Security State: British Colonial Knowledge and Empire-Building in Asia*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), 9.

²⁷ Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia* (London: John Murray, 2006), William Dalrymple also reprises the narrative in his recent work: William Dalrymple, *Return of a King* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

²⁸ James Hevia suggests that Kipling in fact took the phrase from John Kaye's account. The phrase is regularly ascribed to Arthur Conolly, one of a clutch of nineteenth century explorers who travelled through Afghanistan, though as Hevia points out Conolly makes only one reference to the phrase in his published account, describing a child's game in a remote Central Asian town. His oft-cited correspondence with Henry Rawlinson is dismissed by Hevia as being a throw-away comment by a man writing in a hurry to make the mail. Hevia, *The Imperial Security State*, 11.

into accepting the benefits of 'civilization'.²⁹ Yet the term has taken on a life all of its own – perhaps due to its poetic, dramatic, alliterative and even sterilizing qualities. As James Hevia has noted, the metaphor obscures the enormous amounts of violence that occurred during this period, as well as obscuring a litany of historical facts that demonstrate its relatively weak analytical value.³⁰ The narrative of Anglo-Russian rivalry is a prominent theme in the archives, but this has all-too-often been unproblematically subsumed under the 'great game' rubric. The logic underpinning this narrative is often drowned out as commentators have striven to identify great power rivalries as an enduring international theme. Following Benjamin Hopkins, whilst this narrative of competition may (on occasions) 'be the dominant one of the archives, it is far from the only, or indeed the most important one.'³¹ The great game appears to be a classic case of the historian's maxim that "history does not repeat; historians repeat one another".³²

Aside from terminological concerns, there are a number of additional reasons why the great game as a *narrative* should be questioned. As the sources reveal, this rivalry - to the extent that it existed in the early stages - was much more fragmented in its rationale, and more contested than a simple bi-polar analysis allows. The actors with a central role in this game were also far more numerous, and arguably more instrumental in the machinations of the 'game' than such a narrative suggests. As Hopkins highlights for example, the First Anglo-Afghan war had more to do with Anglo-Sikh relations than it did with Anglo-Russian relations.³³ The British had reached the opinion that they would not be able to reconcile the rulers of the Sikh Kingdom, Ranjit Singh, and the ruler of the Kingdom of Afghanistan, Dost Muhammad Khan, in order to create the regional stability they craved and therefore sought a new

²⁹ Seymour Becker, 'The 'Great Game': The History of an Evocative Phrase', *Asian Affairs*, 43/1 (2012), 63.

³⁰ Hevia, *The Imperial Security State*, 11.

³¹ Benjamin Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 34.

³² Michael Howard, 'The uses and abuses of military history', *RUSI Journal*, 138/1 (1993), 27.

³³ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*; Hopkins, 'The Myth of the 'Great Game'.

system.³⁴ During this time Anglo-Russian relations were mainly of indirect concern via the suspected Perso-Russian alliance.

Perhaps more importantly for our purposes here, the territory of Afghanistan itself, as defined in modern terms, constituted at least three semi-autonomous entities at this time, dominated by the cities of Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat. In addition to this were the territories of Balkh, Balochistan, Sistan, and Ghazni. Whilst it would be inaccurate to describe these as independent city-states, the particular forms of rule that were familiar to these areas rendered their loyalty to the Kingdom of Kabul less absolute than is suggested by the label 'Afghanistan'. Indeed, this state of affairs was well understood by certain East India Company officials who occasionally factored this into their policy planning. Aside from this city-based territorial construct, British officials frequently discussed the variety of 'independent' peoples that interspersed in between major population areas, and inhabited the less accessible regions. These groups often intrigued and occasionally fascinated the British. This geographic ambiguity, in terms of where the authority of the Kingdom of Kabul extended to, and therefore, where the territory of Afghanistan-proper lay, has further confused the accuracy of the great game narrative with respect to Afghanistan's development as a political community. The narrative leads to the presumption that Afghanistan was a single unit over which Britain and Russia competed. This was simply not the case. The archives show that deciding what Afghanistan really was, or whether it in fact existed at all, was a recurrent question animating policy decisions. Therefore, knowledge and information was constantly sought on the individual rulers of this fragmented polity in order to identify their likely adherence to any wider social compact.

A further doubt on the concept of the great game derives from the fact that throughout the nineteenth century, the evolving polity of 'Afghanistan' was accepted to have been under the British 'sphere of influence' by all

³⁴ See also Yapp, although this account prioritizes European concerns as an explanation for diplomacy in Central Asia at this time. Malcolm Yapp, *Strategies of British India: Britain, Iran, and Afghanistan 1798-1850* (Oxford: OUP, 1980).

governments involved; British, Russian, and Afghan rulers. Indeed, as I argue in chapter four, the area of Afghanistan was to a degree sealed off from the most dramatic activities of those who played the 'game' through the exclusionary policies that were ascribed to it. This is often attributed to a 'buffer state' policy but again this reading prioritizes Anglo-Russian relations, and regularly fails to deal with what was meant by a 'state' at this time. In chapter four I argue that this exclusionary policy had a logic of its own that derived in large part from British anxieties over a space they struggled to comprehend. The fallout from the First Anglo-Afghan War and constant warnings from the Amir of Afghanistan that he could not guarantee the safety of any British travelers suppressed most attempts to send forth agents, however heavily disguised. Whilst this put a strain on information and inhibited regularized diplomatic intercourse, it does not follow that Anglo-Afghan relations were therefore non-existent – rather they can be described in terms beyond the signing of treaties and the exchanging of envoys. At the heart of this was an irresolvable dilemma for the British, a dilemma that described imperial relations with other excluded regions of the Indian frontier; one of 'the will to knowledge yet the inability to satisfy that desire'.³⁵

The great game defined as a perception of Russian threat, at least in the early stages of its chronology has also been shown to be often a figment of the British imagination.³⁶ As Hopkins argues, it provided a familiar 'threat conceptualization' both to 'initiate and justify action' but the far more pressing concern for the British was the potential damage caused to the company's prestige by *rumours* of British weakness and advancing Russian arms.³⁷ As such, and particularly in the initial stages in the period leading up to, and following the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-42), the spectre of the Russian threat became inflated beyond reasonable levels, distorting the historiography which later became dominated by this imperial rivalry.

³⁵ Ulrike Hillemann *Asian Empire and British Knowledge* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), 1.

³⁶ This is not universally so. Drawing on Russian sources William Dalrymple has recently pointed to evidence of Russian desires for influence in the region at the time of the first Anglo-Afghan war. Yet the tendency to essentialize Russian military threat both in the archives and in the historiography can be disputed. Dalrymple, *Return of a King*.

³⁷ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, 36.

In focusing on the activities and interests of the great powers, Afghanistan's own agency, and what could be described as the 'Afghanistan context' is suppressed. As Thomas Barfield has eloquently put it, '[a]ll the focus on war and visiting conquerors overshadows the country's own inhabitants, except as the rough warriors who served as speed bumps on the highway of conquest or more recently earned a reputation for making the place ungovernable. As a result, Afghanistan itself remains just the vague backdrop in a long-running international drama where others hold the speaking parts.'³⁸ This historiographical preoccupation has encouraged the mistaken idea that Afghanistan is somehow the 'graveyard of empires',³⁹ further sustaining the myth that the country resembles a perpetual stage for tragedy and violence. As many have observed however, before becoming an imperial frontier region in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Afghanistan was for millennia at the crossroads of empires and host to passing trends and peoples.⁴⁰ As Afghanistan's cultural history demonstrates, the country was not founded on the trapping, destruction, and ending of empires, but on their development, exchange, and their reinvention.⁴¹

Moving on from the perils of the great game thesis, the 'graveyard of empires' narrative is a further example of tendentious and misleading engagement with Afghanistan's imperial encounter. Such narratives, particularly in light of the international presence in Afghanistan since 2001, tend to portray an 'illusory present'⁴² and encourage the instrumentalization of Afghanistan's history for political ends. As Rob Johnson observes, Afghanistan's history is

³⁸ Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1-2.

³⁹ Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2009).

⁴⁰ Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Oxford: OUP, 1997); Fredrick Hiebert and Pierre Cambon (eds.), *Afghanistan: Crossroads of the Ancient World* (London: British Museum Press, 2011); Arnold J. Toynbee, *Between Oxus and Jumna* (London: OUP, 1967).

⁴¹ Martin Bayly, 'Allow it to speak for itself', *Times Higher Education*, 10 March (2011), 47-8. Available online: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/415457.article>.

⁴² George Lawson, 'The Promise of Historical Sociology in International Relations', *International Studies Review*, 8:3 (2006), 404. See also: Lawson, George, 'The Eternal Divide? History and International Relations', *The European Journal of International Relations*, 18 (2012), 203-226.

often 'contested', 'used to reinforce particular agendas and score moral points either in favour of continued intervention, or against it'.⁴³ This is of course nothing new. Writing in 1856 Kaye remarked in his monumental account of the First Anglo-Afghan war that he felt he was 'walking, as it were, with a torch in my hand over a floor strewn thickly with gunpowder. There is the chance of an explosion at every step.'⁴⁴ He had good reason to be fearful. Following the war the inquest into the decisions that led to hostilities became a political football in Parliament. The opposition Tories sought to present certain Company officials in a negative light to further their own political agendas. Questions over the wisdom of the Afghanistan campaign shifted from questions of appropriateness, to questions of professional competence.

Many historians followed suite. Despite his fears of 'explosions', Kaye's study cast Auckland and his circle of advisors as a cabalistic collective who had captured the decision-making process for their own paranoid 'Russophobic' ends.⁴⁵ Henry Durand, writing in 1879 turned his sights instead on the political officer Alexander Burnes, a man he described as 'of inordinate ambition but of average ability and shallow acquirements'.⁴⁶ Auckland, he argued had been 'misled by the reputation which Burnes's amusing but most inaccurate book of travels had obtained for its author'.⁴⁷ Norris too sought to recover Auckland's reputation in his 1969 account.⁴⁸ Military operations came in for similarly forensic analysis. Such 'great man' accounts of the history have tended to linger on points of professional competence, personality and reputation whilst overlooking the wider socio-structural and socio-cultural environment. Defeat has therefore become attributed, as Noelle notes, to a series of 'theoretically reversible political and administrative blunders',⁴⁹ directing attention away from the specifics of

⁴³ Rob Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War* (London: Hurst and Company, 2011).

⁴⁴ John William Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan*, Volume I (London: Richard Bentley, 1857), x.

⁴⁵ Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan*.

⁴⁶ Henry Marion Durand, *The First Afghan War and its Causes* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1879), 34.

⁴⁷ Durand, *The First Afghan War and its Causes*, 34.

⁴⁸ J. A. Norris, *The First Afghan War, 1838-1842* (Cambridge: CUP, 1967).

⁴⁹ Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan*, 38.

Afghanistan itself as an explanation for the manner in which the British went to war.

Contestations at the time further disrupted the archival bias. Indeed, even before the 'Army of Retribution' had withdrawn, a dispute erupted between the Crown and the East India Company (EIC) over the crippling financial costs of the intervention. It was in the interests of the EIC to play up the Russian threat in this debate in order to justify its claim that the Crown should assist in covering these costs. This was not because the EIC believed that this threat was credible – quite the opposite in fact – rather it was in order to show that the fictitious *casus belli* related to 'European' not 'Indian' affairs, thereby relieving the EIC from full financial indemnity.⁵⁰ This had the added effect of further presenting the war in terms of Anglo-Russian rather than Anglo-Afghan relations.

The treatment given to Afghanistan's international history generally, and its imperial encounter specifically, has often obscured alternative narratives beyond the positioning and interests of the great powers. Recovering the sunken histories of this period begins with a relocation of the subjects and objects of study.

Relocating the History

Put simply, this thesis prioritizes Anglo-Afghan relations as an area of focus. Rather than reducing these relations to a function of geopolitical concerns, either in Central Asia or elsewhere, I seek to study Anglo-Afghan relations on their own terms. Again, this is not to suggest that wider questions of *realpolitik* were not significant – clearly they were – but without understanding first what Afghanistan itself meant to the British, it is hard to comprehend the manner in which the British chose to engage.⁵¹ Whilst

⁵⁰ IOR/L/PS/3/12, p.497-513.

⁵¹ Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan*, 40.

knowledge of Afghanistan did not cause the Anglo-Afghan wars, it did make those conflicts imaginable in the first place, and demonstrates that there was more to this relationship than the wars themselves.

Recent scholarship has aided this shift in emphasis by providing more detailed accounts of Afghanistan's history. Thomas Barfield's cultural and political history is a key text in this respect.⁵² A major weakness in the great power narrative is that it rarely grapples with the reasons for instability within Afghanistan during the nineteenth century that was the source of so much concern within British officialdom. Shining light on this, Barfield identifies the key driver of political instability in Afghanistan as the opening up of political authority to groups not traditionally part of the ruling dynastic elite. The nineteenth century, he argues, was defined by the authority of 'professional rulers', 'hereditary elites who saw government as their business'.⁵³ Whilst competition could come from within this ruling elite (as it frequently did) such authority was rarely challenged by 'outsiders'. Successive rulers, Barfield argues, abided by the logic of avoiding conflict with the independent communities within the loose territorial concept of Afghanistan. Imperial encounters did however serve to disrupt this pattern through inciting the rise of competing groups, and by extension, competing moral orders underpinning legitimacy. In opposing foreign invaders, Afghan rulers were often compelled to mobilize certain sections of the population, often with a call to faith, or through exploiting other affective ties. This was not merely a nineteenth century phenomenon. The opposition to competing Persian Safavid and Indian Moghul empires in the fifteenth century had first given rise to Pashtun consciousness that later evolved into an anti-Moghul movement in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁵⁴ In the case of

⁵² Barfield, *Afghanistan*. See also, Thomas J. Barfield, 'Problems in establishing legitimacy in Afghanistan', *Iranian Studies*, 37/2 (2004), 263-93.

⁵³ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 3; Barfield, 'Problems in establishing legitimacy in Afghanistan'.

⁵⁴ M. Nazif Shahrani, 'Statebuilding and Social Fragmentation in Afghanistan: A Historical Perspective', in Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner, *The State, Religion, and Ethnic Politics: Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 28. In a similar argument Nile Green has shown how Mughal-era diasporic networks had fostered a sense of 'Afghan' identity amongst Pashtun elites in advance of British influence in the region. Nile Green, 'Tribe, Diaspora, and Statehood in Afghan History', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 67/1 (2008), 171-211.

the first Anglo-Afghan war, the effects of this external influence on the socio-political character of the Afghan community included a greater role for Islam in political life and a greater degree of tribal stratification - a legacy of the campaign to expel the British.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the reliance of successive Afghan rulers on British subsidies up to independence in 1919 inhibited the search for a more sustainable form of political legitimacy. By drawing on outside support, Afghan rulers could avoid seeking revenue from the Afghan population in return for political representation. The apogee of this policy was Abdur Rahman Khan's rule following the second Anglo-Afghan war, a period that witnessed a process of 'internal imperialism',⁵⁶ buttressed by British military and financial support, turning Afghanistan into a politically centralized nation-state. Once again, this incited new competitors for political power, only this time they were provoked by opposition to the policies of their own ruler rather than by the invasions of the British.

Benjamin Hopkins meanwhile has sought to locate Afghanistan's emergence as a 'proto-state' within an evolving political, economic, and military context. Hopkins' account encompasses the changing intellectual and bureaucratic practices of the East India Company - including practices related to colonial knowledge - and also considers Afghanistan's location within wider regional patterns of economic and military change associated with early forms of globalization.⁵⁷ Similarly, Hanifi has turned attention towards the impact of the changing commercial environment in Afghanistan's neighbouring territories during the nineteenth century, and the effect this had on the economic geography of the country as well on identity politics. In an interesting counter-narrative to those who favour the idea that Afghanistan was immune to, or excluded from, colonialism in the nineteenth century, Hanifi argues that Afghan communities retained 'colonial moorings'⁵⁸ in India

⁵⁵ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 122. Again, the rise of Islam demonstrates deeper roots in the civil wars that wracked Afghanistan from around 1804 prior to the British intervention in 1838-9. See: Shahrani, 'Statebuilding and Social Fragmentation in Afghanistan', 33-4.

⁵⁶ The term belongs to Louis Dupree. Cited in Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 151.

⁵⁷ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*.

⁵⁸ Shah Mahmud Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan: Market Relations and State Formation on a Colonial Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). Available Online: <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/hanifi/index.html>, 2.

and that despite being defined by limited access, these moorings had the effect of perpetuating a pre-existing fluidity in 'Afghan' identity as a response to competition over market opportunities. Thus the strong state that emerged under Abdur Rahman Khan from 1880 in fact inhibited what had previously been a naturally open cultural, political, and economic order – one that was favourable to a market environment.⁵⁹

These secondary sources are of immense value in recovering Afghanistan's imperial encounter in a way that is appreciative of the Afghanistan context. However, there is still a relative dearth of literature covering Afghanistan's diplomatic relations with the British in the nineteenth century. Existing accounts have tended to focus on the periods immediately preceding these conflicts, and those accounts that have taken a longer view, or covered the period in between, have tended to discuss this in terms of Anglo-Russian rivalry. Both conflicts had a defining impact on nineteenth century Anglo-Afghan relations and for this reason they are a prominent feature of this study. However, new insights can be gained through focusing on these relations on their own terms, and particularly by looking at those periods less frequently subject to scholarly attention. Afghanistan did not only come into view during moments of crisis for the British, but was a region that they constantly monitored. For this reason the scope of this work considers the *longue durée* in order to more adequately assess these relations. Relocating the history to allow such an account requires an appreciation of the structure of imperial policy-making.

Crucially, in recovering British understandings of Afghanistan itself, we must concentrate on the so-called 'men on the spot': Governors, Viceroys, Procounseles, and especially political officers.⁶⁰ For the British administrators of empire, it was neither possible nor desirable to operate on the basis of centralized control. Imperial administration, at its core, was thus 'a continuous interplay between mother country and colonial communities, between centre and periphery, a series of essentially bilateral relationships

⁵⁹ Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan*.

⁶⁰ Yapp, *Strategies of British India*, 8.

which entailed constant negotiation rather than the imposition of rule and the acceptance of subjection.⁶¹ The individuals in between were of critical importance in the flow of information and the decisions that followed from such information. They were 'a kind of pointsman on the railway of thought between two stations'.⁶² The structure of this system was of course subject to alteration, and evolved with the shifting institutional framework of imperial rule. Improvements in technology also aided the speed at which decisions could be made, and ameliorated some of the deficiencies in the information system.⁶³ This system, the individuals that populated it, and the decisions they were responsible for, provide a principal site for study in relocating the history of Anglo-Afghan relations at this time.

At the far end of this information chain were the political officers providing the optic through which the imperial gaze could observe. These men (and they were all men in this case) were the official face of colonial knowledge and information management, yet their background and their actions frequently blurred the boundaries between official and non-official practice. In the early nineteenth century, in the case of Afghanistan, these officials were often not on official business at all, rather there was entrepreneurial spirit to their activities. The East India Company, often took a passing interest in such pursuits, and in certain cases, the full regalia of the British Government supported the ventures, as was case in Mountstuart Elphinstone's 1809 expedition to Peshawar. But more often than not, early Afghanistan explorers were simply fulfilling a masculine ideal of nineteenth century adventurism with tacit Company support.

An outcome of such adventures was a significant body of literature. Often these works are passed off as the antiquated, offensive ramblings of a peculiar breed of imperial chauvinist. Whilst this aspect certainly comes

⁶¹ Peter Burroughs, 'Imperial Institutions and the Government of Empire', in Porter and Low (eds.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume III, The Nineteenth Century*, 170.

⁶² Burroughs, 'Imperial Institutions and the Government of Empire', 176.

⁶³ Duncan Bell has argued that such changes even wrought a shift in the perceptions of what empire could achieve. See: Bell, Duncan, 'Dissolving Distance: Technology, Space, and Empire in British Political Thought, 1770-1900', *The Journal of Modern History*, 77/3 (2005), 523-62; Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

through in these accounts, they also provide a rich source of data, aided by the prevailing intellectual trend of empiricism. This tradition encouraged the seemingly endless recording of observations of any kind. Such men were therefore, in the words of Dupree, the U2 spyplanes of their day,⁶⁴ or perhaps to update the metaphor, the aerial drones of the nineteenth century. To varying degrees, this knowledge was incorporated into the official canon of colonial knowledge. Elphinstone's work was the most famous of these, leading Hopkins to refer to the 'Elphinstonian episteme', one that definitively delineated the universe of the knowable regarding Afghanistan'.⁶⁵ Hopkins' groundbreaking work on Afghanistan offers many avenues for scholarship on this period and location. In chapter two I seek to go beyond the 'Elphinstonian episteme' and consider those Europeans who appropriated and developed Elphinstone's work. In particular, I explore the works of those who would subsequently serve in an official capacity, constituting a loose 'knowledge community', informing the policies of the company and later the Crown.

Whereas Hopkins focuses on the narrowing of the 'episteme' through the professionalization and bureaucratization of the company's ranks, in chapter three I focus specifically on narrowing resulting from the decision to go to war, which served as a moment of 'closure' enacted upon understandings of the Afghan polity. Policy makers were in effect cognitively trapped by Elphinstone's works, and those of his intellectual successors – particularly those who informed policy. This process of closure was therefore a dialectic between political action and colonial knowledge - the knowledge community supplied the realms of possibility; political action made the 'possible' manifest.

Chapter four turns to the period following the first Anglo-Afghan war and to the more pernicious and negative representations of Afghanistan that took on a greater prominence at this time. These projections also exhibited a more self-justificatory nature. The Afghans were no longer to be seen as fragmented and fractious by virtue of their violent recent past, but rather

⁶⁴ Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 371.

⁶⁵ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, 17.

they were inescapably so by virtue of their inherent, intransigent nature. Seeking to atone for their brutal ejection from the country, the British found solace in placing Afghan character firmly beyond the pale of 'civilized' international society. This served both emotional and practical ends. On the one hand it allowed for a sense of catharsis, whereby British prestige could be rescued through calling attention to the barbaric, uncivilized and perhaps unsporting way in which their armies had been cast out of Afghanistan. This was mainly a narcissistic reflex, but one that was also prompted by the long running fear that their military position owed to a fragile image of military authority, and that any inkling of weakness would spark a wave of instability as the inhabitants of the colonized lands took advantage of the opportunity to throw off their colonial overlords.

On a more practical level, these representations also offered a rationale for a limit to the Indian frontier, thereby stabilizing the associated cost of continual expansion, and providing a loose sense of cartographic stability. From a legal perspective too, the presentation of an uncivilized 'beyond' justified the oppressive practices meted out on the frontier tribes, whilst preserving the image of British adherence to the evolving standards of international law as they related to more 'civilized' states. Meanwhile the presentation of Afghanistan, and Afghans as interminably violent, rapacious, duplicitous, and intriguing, justified a resilient policy of non-engagement, one that slowly evolved into a more permissive policy of non-intervention, at least in a physical sense.

This period demonstrates, therefore, the tendency for the more pejorative aspects of the orientalist discourse to be partly a function of crisis and conflict, in this case, as a consequence of the First Anglo-Afghan War.⁶⁶ But in addition it shows how wider developments in imperial thought informed these representations, giving them a more concrete form and purpose, including in policy terms. The colonial knowledge of Elphinstone *et al* still

⁶⁶ Tarak Barkawi and Keith Stanski, *Orientalism and War* (London: Hurst, 2012); Keith Stanski, "So these folks are aggressive': An Orientalist Reading of Afghan Warlords', *Security Dialogue*, 41/1 (2009), 73-94; Bayly, *Empire and Information*.

provided a backdrop to this, but it was an increasingly sclerotic schemata, as the formalizing processes of the increasingly bureaucratic colonial state took hold. As they moved away from the sweeping gaze of colonial knowledge, images of Afghanistan were becoming mediated by a new techno-cultural⁶⁷ enterprise of frontier management and a more insistent British government in India.

Relocating the history in the ideas, the institutions, and the processes shaping Anglo-Afghan relations not only recovers a sunken history from a literature that tends to be dominated by geopolitical great power rivalries, it also gives crucial insight into why the Russian threat mattered in the first place. The British were developing their own culturally-contingent understanding of how the weak Afghan polity would fall prey to outside influences. This inevitably drew them to consider the categories and characteristics, the histories and grievances, and the vicissitudes and intrigues, of the Afghan socio-political community. With a basic grasp of these categories they were able to construct their own 'quasi-causal' representations⁶⁸ and began to imagine how their neuroses might manifest themselves in actual outcomes. Certain communities became branded therefore as potentially threatening, due to their perceived affinity with nefarious outside actors, such as the Shi'a communities and the Persian government.

Colonial knowledge served a dual purpose. As well as identifying threats, it allowed insight into how such threats might be countered. For many policy-makers (though not all) this demanded a functioning coherent polity, a social compact. In order to construct a plausible story of how this might be achieved they drew once more on colonial knowledge. However, they were frequently stymied in this quest, often as a result of their own actions.

⁶⁷ Derek Gregory, 'From a view to kill: Drones and late-modern war', *Theory Culture Society*, 27/7-8 (2011), 188-215.

⁶⁸ Jutta Weldes, 'Constructing National Interests', *European Journal of International Relations*, 2/3 (1996), 281-2.

Beyond the specifics of Anglo-Afghan relations, a wider purpose of this thesis is to contribute to the exploration of the interface between imperial history and the study of international relations. The academic disciplines of History and IR, it has been noted, have not always enjoyed an easy relationship.⁶⁹ In the early 2000s there was a refocusing on this ongoing schism.⁷⁰ On the one hand it was argued that such a debate would help to overcome certain ahistorical attitudes that had plagued IR throughout much of the Cold War period, an attitude that was in part a result of the transhistorical commitments inherent to the dominant rationalist and positivist theoretical approaches.⁷¹ In a good example of this critique, George Lawson noted IR's tendency to present history as 'scripture': 'the mining of the past in order to confirm suppositions about the present; the smoothing out of differences, varieties, and processes of change in the interests of methodological purity and theoretical rigidity; and the bracketing off of history behind an eternal "illusory present"'.⁷² In short, IR was not just ahistorical, but also *ahistoricist*; reluctant to engage reflectively with categories such as 'state', 'system', 'sovereignty', 'power' and 'empire'.⁷³

As these scholars pointed out, a more historically sensitive IR would uncover the nuanced nature of such categories, demonstrating their historically contingent meanings, rather than black-boxing them as essentialized, even reified categories. The coincidental rise of critical theory and constructivist

⁶⁹ Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds), *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists, and the Study of International Relations* (London: The MIT Press, 2001); George Lawson, 'The Eternal Divide?'; David Armitage, 'The Fifty Years' Rift: Intellectual History and International Relations', *Modern Intellectual History*, 1:1 (2004), pp. 97-109.

⁷⁰ See for example, Michael Cox, Tim Booth, and Ken Dunne, 'Empires, Systems, and States: Great transformations in international politics', *Review of International Studies*, 27:1 (2001), pp. 1-15.

⁷¹ Christian Reus-Smit, 'Reading History through Constructivist Eyes', *Millennium* 37:2 (2008), p. 395.

⁷² Lawson, 'The Promise of Historical Sociology in International Relations'; Lawson, 'The Eternal Divide?'.

⁷³ Hobson, John, George Lawson, and Justin Rosenberg, 'Historical Sociology', *LSE Research Online*, June 2010 (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/28016>).

approaches with their emphasis on linguistics, subjectivity, and the continual reproduction of social institutions offered a more questioning attitude to core categories and ontologies.⁷⁴ Yet for some, this had only gone so far. As Colin Wight argued, 'rather than embarking on new theoretical or empirical avenues, many scholars merely "poured the newly emerging patterns of thought into the old framework"'.⁷⁵ The 'cultural turn' that constructivist approaches had carried into the field remained, for some, lacking in emancipatory spirit, tied as they often were to simple identity-based binary narratives of enemy/friend, or wedded to familiar (state-based) objects such as ideas of national strategic cultures. The prospect that constructivism – with its intellectual heritage deriving in part from critical theory – would offer a more historicist approach in IR's engagement with history has in some respects fallen short of expectations.⁷⁶

The 'historical turn' (or 're-turn' as Lawson rightly labels it)⁷⁷ entailed a move away from IR's preoccupation with diplomatic history, which was becoming increasingly marginalized within disciplinary history anyhow, and a turn towards social and cultural history. Some called for greater attention in particular to imperial history,⁷⁸ a field that had itself undergone a 'cultural turn', yet one by which IR remained curiously unmoved. As Tarak Barkawi, one of the leading proponents of an 'imperial turn' pointed out, '[r]epeatedly, it would seem, IR was founded amidst empire, but discovered instead only a world of sovereign states and their collective action problems.' As he notes, the failure of social science and IR to deal with questions of empire and imperialism left the discipline inadequate 'to the experiences and histories of most of the peoples and places on the planet'.⁷⁹ For Barkawi and Laffey,

⁷⁴ Reus-Smit, 'Reading History through Constructivist Eyes'.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Daniel Jacobi, 'On the 'Construction' of Knowledge and the Knowledge of 'Construction'', *International Political Sociology*, 5/1 (2011), 94-7.

⁷⁶ Lawson, 'The Eternal Divide?', 209-10. Armitage, 'The Fifty Years' Rift', 100.

⁷⁷ Lawson, 'The Eternal Divide', 205.

⁷⁸ Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, 'Retrieving the Imperial: Empire and International Relations', *Millennium*, 31/1 (2002), 109-27; Robert Vitalis, 'Birth of a discipline', in David Long and Brian Schmidt (eds), *Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 159-82.

⁷⁹ Barkawi, 'Empire and Order in International Relations and Security Studies'. See also David Long and Brian Schmidt (eds), *Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005).

engagement with Imperial History offered a threefold benefit of escaping the 'territorial trap',⁸⁰ highlighting the importance of hierarchy in international relations, and engaging with international relations as 'thick' social, political, cultural, and military exchange. Central to this was the proposal that histories of the European and non-European world were co-implicated in each other; that imperialism highlighted processes of co-constitution in state identity.⁸¹

As this suggests however, in addition to enriching disciplinary knowledge, accounts of imperial history from the IR perspective also offer important insights into disciplinary foundations as scholars have used the 'historical turn' to enquire into the intellectual history of international political thought.⁸² Alongside this 'turn' there emerged a new sensitivity to political theory, seeking to historically contextualize the international political theory at the core of prevailing IR theoretical accounts.⁸³ As many of the participants in this endeavour found, attention to imperialism put a different spin on a curious disciplinary presumption that the tenets of international theory travelled more or less progressively from the likes of Thucydides, to Hobbes, to the treaty of Westphalia and on to the contemporary states system. Drawing attention specifically to the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Schmitt and Long noted how the 'willful forgetting of empire' obscured the reality that the discipline was not born, as the conventional account suggested, in the 'first debate' between idealists and realists, but within a far more important theme concerning deeper tensions between competing conceptions of imperialism and internationalism. This is a tension that complexifies the presumptions surrounding the ontological stability of 'state',

⁸⁰ John Agnew, 'The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory', *Review of International Political Economy*, 1/1 (1994), 53-80.

⁸¹ Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, 'Retrieving the Imperial'; Martin Shaw, 'Post-Imperial and Quasi-Imperial: State and Empire in the Global Era', *Millennium*, 31/2 (2002), 327-336.

⁸² Armitage, 'The Fifty Years' Rift'; Bell, *Victorian Visions of Global Order*; Bell, 'Writing the World'.

⁸³ Duncan Bell, 'International Relations: The dawn of a historiographical turn?', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 3/1 (2001), 115-26.

'sovereignty', 'nation', and indeed 'empire' itself.⁸⁴ In effect therefore, the 'historical turn' to imperial history, and the 'historiographical turn' could inform one another, allowing substantive and theoretical reflection within the discipline, and towards the discipline itself.

This historical turn has opened up enquiry by IR scholars into the modalities of imperial expansion. Jordan Branch has shown how the spread of the territorial state was not simply the exporting of Eurocentric constructs of sovereign authority, but rather a process of 'colonial reflection' whereby colonial officials unfamiliar with local spatialities of power and authority were forced to rely on a more intelligible 'scientific' approach through cartography – a method that was then imported back to Europe.⁸⁵ Edward Keene, through his reappraisal of Grotius' work has highlighted how the concept of 'divided sovereignty', the idea that sovereignty could be shared by two powers, provided theoretical justification for imperialist ventures throughout the nineteenth century.⁸⁶ By focusing on this core disciplinary concept, Keene's work shows how imperialism was in large part the story of the disassembling of sovereignty, justified by the same political theory that later IR scholars would use to sustain a concept of international society and ultimately the international system based on a concept of sovereign states.⁸⁷ Meanwhile, Gerry Simpson - although not focusing exclusively on empire - has shown how during the nineteenth century imperial entities were responsible for the construction of a legal framework that institutionalized a form of 'legal hegemony' and 'anti-pluralism'; one that mandated distinctions between 'Great Powers' and 'outlaw states', a distinction that he argues has left a legacy to this day.⁸⁸ In these three examples then, the core disciplinary criteria of the territorial state, sovereignty, and anarchy are placed in their

⁸⁴ Long and Schmidt, *Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations*. See also Duncan Bell, 'Writing the World'; Duncan Bell *The Idea of Greater Britain*; Duncan Bell (ed.), *Victorian Visions of Global Order* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007).

⁸⁵ Jordan Branch, 'Colonial reflection' and territoriality: The peripheral origins of sovereign statehood', *European Journal of International Relations*, 18/2 (2012), 277-97; Jordan Branch, 'Mapping the Sovereign State: Technology, Authority, and Systemic Change', *International Organization*, 65/1 (2011), 1-36.

⁸⁶ Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁸⁷ Armitage, 'The Fifty Years' Rift'.

⁸⁸ Gerry Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004).

historical context, rescued from the transhistorical formulations that positivist approaches had long propounded.

Perhaps more intriguing - as highlighted in Keene's work on divided sovereignty and Simpson's work on 'outlaw states' - is the story of the normative policing of such terminology; an activity frequently the preserve of the powerful.⁸⁹ Simpson notes how states could be 'differentiated in law according to their moral nature, material and intellectual power, ideological disposition or cultural attributes'.⁹⁰ The act of dividing sovereignty, or designating a state as an 'outlaw' thus required a (sometimes deliberate) act of social construction; the marshaling of a certain set of representations drawing on culturally contingent understandings. A key trope here was the distinction between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' states, and as Gerrit Gong shows, the standards by which this status was judged exhibited a profound cultural bias towards European practices, and allowed latitude for subjective (or even hypocritical) appraisals based on such taboo practices as polygamy, *sati*,⁹¹ and slavery.⁹²

In reality, the power of racist sentiments meant that South and Central Asian states were never likely to escape such depictions, although distinctions within these ideas of race - the 'other' within the 'other' phenomenon - were apparent. But the sustenance of such distinctions rested too on rhetorical collusion between imperial entities. This raises an important point. Accounts that emphasize great power rivalries in the imperial setting neglect the common perspectives held by rival empires on the subject of non-European or 'uncivilized' states. Whilst in Europe the

⁸⁹ See also Thomas J. Bierstecker and Cynthia Weber (eds.), *State Sovereignty as Social Construct*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1996); David Strang, 'Contested sovereignty: The social construction of colonial imperialism', in Thomas J. Bierstecker and Cynthia Weber (eds.), *State Sovereignty as Social Construct*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 22-49.

⁹⁰ Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States*, 6.

⁹¹ The ritual self-immolation of widowers on the death of their husband.

⁹² Gong, *The Standard of 'Civilization' in International Society*, 14-15. See also Jennifer Pitts, 'Boundaries of Victorian International Law' in Duncan Bell (ed.), *Victorian Visions of Global Order* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 67-88; Duncan Bell, 'Empire and International Relations in Victorian Political Thought', *The Historical Journal*, 49/1 (2006), 281-98; Antony Anghie, 'Finding the Peripheries: Sovereignty and colonialism in nineteenth-century international law', *Harvard International Law Journal*, 40/1, (1999), 1-71.

balance of power between sovereign states was a shared perspective, in South and Central Asia, Britain and Russia respectively justified their subjugation of these spaces by perpetuating representations that underlined a concept of 'unequal sovereigns'.⁹³ Sovereignty, or the *possibility* of sovereignty, thus held different meanings in different geographic locales, a state of affairs perpetuated by great power collusion.

Attention to imperial history can uncover alternative readings of core disciplinary criteria providing a reminder of the historical contingency of these categories whose ontological stability is often taken for granted. Equally, it shows that these categories were continually contested, not just within imperial political thought, but in the process of global exchange, of which imperialism was simply one variant. Very often this was the story of the exchange along 'webs of empire' from the (imperial) centre to the periphery and back again.⁹⁴ In turn this highlights how the very *possibility* of the centre depended upon the periphery itself. Whilst the constitutive effects of imperial exchange are often overlooked by an IR discipline that remains analytically imprisoned by its own theory-driven orthodoxies, attention to imperial history can help to alleviate this bias. New avenues of research, and new political geographies as sites for the constitution of power, are opened up as a result.

Methods and Approaches: An Agnostic Constructivism

As discussed then, alongside the recovery of Anglo-Afghan relations, a key objective of this work is to explore the interface between IR on the one hand, and imperial history on the other. However, arguing simply for a dialogue between these two fields of study says nothing of the mode in which this should occur. For the purposes of making a disciplinary contribution it is necessary to outline an approach, or at least an attitude towards this mode of

⁹³ Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States*.

⁹⁴ Tony Ballantyne, 'Rereading the Archive and Opening up the Nation-State: Colonial Knowledge in South Asia and Beyond', in Antoinette Burton, (ed.) *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (London: Duke University Press, 2003), 104.

investigation. I describe this approach and attitude as one of ‘agnostic constructivism’. This term is meant to capture the fact that although I believe approaches offered by constructivism to be useful to the purposes I set out in this work, I do not believe it is possible to describe or outline a constructivist ‘theory’, nor do I seek to ‘test’ such a theory.⁹⁵

This perspective is far from unique – the very questioning of the possibility of a paradigm theory of IR informed the work of constructivist scholars of the so-called ‘first generation’.⁹⁶ Nicholas Onuf’s *World of Our Making* that first introduced the term ‘constructivism’ to the field was in large part a questioning of the very concept of a ‘social science’ that claimed universality for itself. Key to this critique was the observation that IR did not apparently resemble a paradigm of an ‘operative kind’, defined as ‘those ensembles of human practices seen by those engaging in or observing them to have coherence setting them apart from other practices’⁹⁷. On this account whilst the operative paradigm of science, for example, is largely ‘naturally real’, the social sciences are in large part socially constructed, dependent on a social reality constituted by human practices *as well as* material conditions. The theoretical claims put forward by IR scholars that attempted to demarcate ‘international relations’ as an operative paradigm constituting an anarchic state-based system, for example, were simply one example of a disciplinary claim that distracted attention away from the fact that as a social science IR’s operative paradigm is ‘heterogeneous, amorphous, [and] elusive’.⁹⁸ Before constructivism became equated with the maxim that ‘anarchy is what states make of it’ therefore, it carried the far more emancipatory suggestion that IR is what social theorists make of it – a maxim that highlights the historically

⁹⁵ Jeffrey T. Checkel, ‘The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory’, *World Politics*, 50/2 (1998), 324-48.

⁹⁶ The ‘second generation’, meanwhile aimed their sights at the so-called neo-neo synthesis arguably neglected this original insight, instead attempting to provide an alternative ontology whilst retaining the empirical preoccupation of existing ‘neo-utilitarian’ scholarship. See Emanuel Adler, ‘Constructivism in International Relations: Sources, Contributions, and Debates’ in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons (eds.), *Handbook of International Relations*, Second Edition (London: Sage, 2013), 112-44.

⁹⁷ Nicholas Onuf, *World of Our Making* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 14.

⁹⁸ Onuf *World of Our Making*, 16.

contingent nature of any claim to a universal social theory, including those relating to core categories.

The danger of going too far down this deconstructivist route is that we argue away the possibility of International Relations as a discipline. Rather I prefer to keep with the term 'International Relations' and adopt the constructivist insight that as a brand of social theory its study is *necessarily* interdisciplinary⁹⁹ and *necessarily* historically contingent.¹⁰⁰ In this light, what is understood as 'International Relations' today – both as a discipline, and as relations between states – is simply one historical instantiation of a constellation of understandings that has been, and will continue to be, subject to change. This attitude supposes that the responsibility of the scholar of IR operating in a historical mode is to incorporate those aspects of 'social theory' that may reasonably contribute to a concept of the 'international' at a given historical moment, rather than to retrofit existing thinking to that context. This is particularly pertinent in studying a period of history in which the discipline of IR did not exist. In short then, this study is primarily a work of international history that seeks a constructivist dialogue with IR, in a manner that is fruitful for both the historical topic under examination, and the discipline of IR toward which it is directed. Each chapter corresponds roughly to a theme, around which this dialogue operates and through which constructivist approaches are incorporated. These themes are knowledge, policy, and exception.

Knowledge

Accessing the meanings that Afghanistan held for the British specifically requires attention to the key site of colonial knowledge in shaping British perceptions. Often overlooked in existing histories,¹⁰¹ the information and

⁹⁹ Onuf, *World of Our Making*, 16; Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 11.

¹⁰⁰ Reus-Smit, 'Reading History Through Constructivist Eyes'.

¹⁰¹ Although see Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*.

knowledge systems established by the British in the expansion of their South Asian territories were a key edifice of their power and reach,¹⁰² and a key site for the construction of social reality. These practices of imperial ‘meaning-making’ are a reminder that imperialism is not simply the invasion and conquest of physical space, but of epistemological space as well,¹⁰³ and (as constructivism highlights) that the politics of identity is about ‘the continual contest for control over the power necessary to create meaning within a social group’.¹⁰⁴ At the forefront of this epistemological invasion were a core group of European explorers, diplomats, military men, and company officials; a group of individuals I describe in chapter two as ‘knowledge entrepreneurs’ due to their crucial role in elaborating an proto-episteme, or knowledge order by which Afghanistan could be rendered ‘legible’.¹⁰⁵ Constructivism drew on the Durkheimian injunction to ‘consider social facts as things’¹⁰⁶ and as such this immediately offers an approach in which colonial knowledge, and the sociology of that knowledge can become the subject of analysis.

Driving the analysis is the presumption that such knowledge appertains to particular ‘social contexts’; that the manner by which knowledge is acquired, ordered, and interpreted is culturally contingent; and that knowledge is in part a ‘participation in the cultural resources of society’.¹⁰⁷ Whilst many constructivists have focussed primarily on cultural resources (ideas, norms, identities) as explanatory factors in observed behaviour, this risks creating a further variant of theory-laden observation by essentializing culture.¹⁰⁸ The

¹⁰² Christopher A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000); Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*; Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹⁰³ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008); Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, 4. Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.

¹⁰⁴ Ted Hopf, ‘The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory’, *International Security*, 23/1 (1998), 180.

¹⁰⁵ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.

¹⁰⁶ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 30.

¹⁰⁷ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 15; Nico Stehr and Volker Meja (eds.), *Society and Knowledge*, Second Edition (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005), 13.

¹⁰⁸ See for example, Peter Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996); Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009).

sociology of knowledge approach offers a method that views information, ideas, and understanding as emergent phenomena, wherein cultural resources – including knowledge of others - are in the ontological state of becoming rather than simply being.¹⁰⁹ By extension, this approach should not be mistaken for the simple deployment of one society's form of knowledge on another society, but rather the *enacting* of that knowledge in a dynamic process of exchange and renewal. There were two sides to this story.

The basis of British perceptions of Afghanistan through colonial knowledge in a wider sense resembles a moment of encounter across cultural difference. An example of 'friction', giving rise to what anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing describes as 'the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference'.¹¹⁰ As a moment for the definition of cultural form and agency, friction 'inflects historical trajectories, enabling, excluding, and particularizing', creating new collaborations and new identities and interests that may not be to everyone's benefit.¹¹¹ The British encounter with Afghanistan through colonial knowledge was therefore a creative moment – one in which paradigm (in the form of existing knowledge) and practice came together in the ongoing re-formation of the 'corpus' of that knowledge.¹¹² Although Eurocentric practices predominated in this encounter (and in this sense the encounter was unequal), this did not rule out the dependency of Europeans on existing Afghan social, political, and cultural institutions. European travelers, particularly those who stayed for longer periods were also susceptible to occasional moments of 'epistemic insurgency',¹¹³ the reshaping of their observations by local actors, through their reliance on certain informants – particularly by those in a position of power. Therefore whilst wider intellectual trends and ideas shaped British

¹⁰⁹ Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*; Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Stehr and Meja (eds.), *Society and Knowledge*.

¹¹⁰ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Woodstock, Oxon: Princeton University Press, 2005), 4.

¹¹¹ Tsing, *Friction*, 6.

¹¹² Anderson, 'Poetics and Politics in Ethnographic Texts', 92.

¹¹³ I am grateful to Chris Bayly for this phrase. See also, Catherine Walsh, 'Political Epistemic Insurgency, Political Movements and the Refounding of the State', in Mabel Moraña and Bret Gustafson (eds.), *Rethinking Intellectuals in Latin America*, (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2010), 199-211.

understandings of Afghanistan, these understandings should not be seen as synonymous with those ideas and trends. Accessing the *particularity* of Afghanistan in the minds of the British requires an appreciation of the cultural milieu of those who observed and reported on the country, as much as it requires an appreciation of the manner in which this encounter was determined and shaped by moments of friction – at least in the initial stages.

This appreciation links us to the tricky problem of facticity. The claim here is not that colonial knowledge was *entirely* arbitrary or imaginary; observers had to refer to something. Rather, the claim is that in the social world we may “make up people” in a stronger sense than we “make up the world”.¹¹⁴ The recording of a tribal group, for example, may attract the accusation that it is no more than an ‘ethnographic fiction’ but such groupings were not entirely imaginary, rather they were social realities mediated through the practice and perspective of European colonial knowledge. Whilst this is dealt with in more detail in chapter two it is worth noting here that it was the values accorded to ‘tribal society’, and the distinctions made between the characters, lineages, histories, and claims to authority of those tribes that bestowed further socially constructed ideas upon such notions. The description of Afghanistan through colonial knowledge therefore generated ‘constitutive effects’: When ideas or social structures ‘create phenomena – properties, powers, dispositions, meanings, etc. – that are conceptually or logically dependent on those ideas or structures, that exist only “in virtue of” them.’¹¹⁵ This didn’t just apply to ‘tribe’. By delimiting the territory of ‘Afghanistan’ the British formulated an entity to which they could refer, however imperfectly. Meanwhile the distinctions between geographies within that territory also carried their own meaning structures – such as the distinction between the settled populations of the plains, and the ‘wild tribes’ of the mountains. Cumulatively therefore, colonial knowledge provided the basis for the ‘idea’ of Afghanistan as a distinct cultural form.

¹¹⁴ Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), 40.

¹¹⁵ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), 88.

Policy

The manifestation of these constitutive effects came in the enacting of this knowledge in the form of policy science, which is the subject of chapter three. The translation of colonial knowledge into policy marked the realization of the constructivist notion that 'people act towards objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them'.¹¹⁶ It was a formative stage in the creation of what Claude Levi Strauss called a 'science of the concrete'¹¹⁷; a shift from the collection of knowledge to the crafting of a regime of legibility by which colonial interventions could be designed. To the extent that the colonial state could be described as a 'state' at all, this was a moment for the elaboration of what James C. Scott has termed a 'state simplification'; a series of 'abridged maps' that 'when allied with state power would enable much of the reality they depicted to be remade.'¹¹⁸ The process of deciding on the policy choice reformulated disparate understandings under distinct policy goals resulting in new narratives and what Jutta Weldes has termed 'quasi-causal' representations of the world.¹¹⁹ In chapter three I describe this process in more detail as it relates to the use of colonial knowledge in the decisions that led to the first Anglo-Afghan war. This process, I argue, amounted to one of 'closure', in which the previous latitude in understanding was shut down as definitive interpretations were sought. As this chapter demonstrates, the contestations between competing goals and competing understandings of the situation, was a key part in the process of closure.

The contestability of understandings of Afghanistan and their relevance to policy debates is a theme that stretches throughout the period but these contestations are a particular feature of chapter three. This theme is returned

¹¹⁶ Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization*, 46/2 (1992), 396-7.

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Said, *Orientalism*, 53.

¹¹⁸ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 3.

¹¹⁹ Weldes, 'Constructing National Interests', 282.

to in the policy debates surrounding the 'forward' and 'close' border schools of thought in the latter half of the century. Policy debates highlight the importance of what Thomas Risse terms a 'logic of arguing' in which actors may challenge validity claims and reach new agreements on the nature of certain problems.¹²⁰ Crucially though, these debates were conducted on the raw material provided by colonial knowledge. As such, the importance of knowledge did not go away, but rather became the foundation upon which the idea of Afghanistan was constructed, and reconstructed, through acting upon policy.

Exception

In chapter four I explore the aftermath of the first Anglo-Afghan war, and the emergence of a newly exclusionary form of the idea of Afghanistan that could be described as 'Afghan exceptionalism'.¹²¹ The experience of the first Anglo-Afghan war closed Afghanistan off for the British, as they feared the consequences of sending their troops, or even their officials beyond the frontier. As discussed, this served a practical goal of removing the need for further expansion and accorded with the wishes of successive Afghan rulers, but it also gave rise to its own representational effects as Afghanistan became cast as a peculiar 'violent geography'. An increasing sense of coherence within the British colonial state, both institutionally and ideologically, left Afghanistan and other frontier regions as an unstable periphery against which the centre could be reaffirmed.

The annexation of the Punjab and the establishing of a new line of defence was key to this new geography of exclusion. But the disasters of the Indian mutiny in 1857, and the shift from company rule to the viceregal system also prompted changes in the intellectual and institutional character of frontier policy that had implications for Anglo-Afghan relations. New experts entered

¹²⁰ Thomas Risse, "'Let's Argue': Communicative Action in World Politics', *International Organization*, 54/1 (2000), 1-39.

¹²¹ The term belongs to: Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War*, 62.

the fold adding to the accumulation of knowledge on the country, but the difficulties in accessibility meant that these experts were generally drawn from officialdom, and especially the military. New knowledge and information was relatively sparse and that which was available became immediately consumed by a watchful community of officials. In the absence of reliable insight, prevailing attitudes of exception and exclusion exhibited a powerful grip on policy. Yet the relative information drought constantly worried officials and highlighted an ever-present tension between a will to know yet a reluctance to engage.

Behind this more practical concern however, lay wider ideas over the foundations of international order. This tension could be described as one between the 'internationalist' outlook in which Afghan 'independence' was asserted, and the 'imperialist' outlook in which Afghanistan's status was only guaranteed to the extent that it served imperial interests. This provides an alternative perspective to the prevailing narrative of Anglo-Russian rivalry at this time. Indeed as chapter four shows, there were in fact examples of Anglo-Russian collusion over the status of Afghanistan that refutes the idea of a security dilemma prevailing across the region. Shared imperialist outlooks on the status of 'uncivilized' states, as well as shared opinions on the duties of great powers allowed a common language between British and Russian diplomats. As such, London and St Petersburg were able to routinize their relations in Central Asia in a way in which Kabul and Calcutta could not achieve – in large part due to the prevailing British view that Afghan rulers were incapable of engaging in 'civilized' diplomatic intercourse.

On an institutional level, the changing structures of frontier defence in the late 1860s and early 1870s encouraged militarization of British frontier policy that put further distance between Afghanistan and the British. A new epistemic community captured frontier policy in the 1870s and became a key voice concerning British policy in Afghanistan. Historians have tended to interpret this as a schism between 'forward policy' adherents and advocates of the 'close border' school. Whilst this broadly describes the debate, it can

obscure the origins of this language in what could be described as a 'knowledge failure' with respect to Afghanistan. Knowledge, policy, and exception therefore converged in a manner that encouraged a highly sterile representation of Afghanistan to emerge.

Conclusion

Imagining Afghanistan seeks to bring imperial history back into IR scholarship in a way that is fruitful for the historical period under investigation, and for the discipline of IR itself. By focusing on colonial knowledge, and its uses in a policy setting, this work seeks to trace and explore the meanings that Afghanistan itself held for the British as well as how these meanings were culturally constructed and co-constituted in moments of encounter. In this 're-turn' to empire in IR, knowledge, and the sociology of that knowledge becomes a key site for the construction of state identity. This work offers explorers new avenues in the conversation between IR and imperial history, and a new interpretation of Anglo-Afghan relations in the nineteenth century. This thesis also offers to place current western engagement in historical context, and offers historical insights into the enduring public policy challenges faced by states seeking to engage in regions of which they have little understanding, or with which they have little engagement.

Chapter Two

Early European Explorers and the Afghanistan Knowledge Community

As the reach of the East India Company's state expanded in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, European officials increasingly came into contact with South Asian communities with whom they had little previous engagement. The encounters at these new fronts of intercultural dialogue took on different forms in different locales. The purpose of this chapter is to describe this series of encounters with respect to early British engagements with Afghanistan. The chapter seeks to describe the intellectual development of British imaginings of this space in the early to mid-nineteenth century and is divided into two principal sections. In the first section I describe the 'corpus' of colonial knowledge that was developed in the first half of the nineteenth century.¹ In the second half I focus in particular on certain key individuals whose works were more instrumental in the construction of an official understanding of the Afghan polity, namely Mountstuart Elphinstone, Charles Masson,² and Alexander Burnes. I describe these individuals as 'knowledge entrepreneurs' in recognition of the impact their understandings had on colonial conceptions of Afghanistan as a state, space, and people. To varying degrees, this status is also afforded to them by virtue of their influence on British foreign policy-making.

¹ In adopting this terminology I refer to Jon Anderson's work in which focussing on a 'corpus' means: Paying attention to 'the middle range, intermediate phenomena between context and text. These include phenomena of social organization in which ethnographic production becomes accessible as a corpus, an intermediate phenomenon between paradigm and practice that together produce a corpus. Focussing on a corpus opens this ground between macroscopic structures and microscopic processes from which to ask After deconstruction, what? and to restore critique of ethnography to social analysis'. Anderson, 'Poetics and Politics in Ethnographic Texts', 92.

² Masson was a deserter from the Bengal Army whose real name was James Lewis. For the purposes of this work I will stick with convention and adopt his public pseudonym.

Of the handful of scholars, diplomats, military personnel, and adventurers who visited Afghanistan and wrote on their experiences in the early nineteenth century, many – though not all – were co-opted into the machinery of the Indian Government or the East India Company at some point. That this should be the case is partly a reflection of the sheer paucity of information (from a European perspective) available on Afghanistan. The figures are remarkable. Prior to the first Anglo-Afghan war, the number of individuals who had travelled to any part of what was loosely termed ‘Afghanistan’ and were associated either privately or publicly with the East India Company numbers fewer than 150. Over 100 of those were part of the escort to the mission of Mountstuart Elphinstone, who in 1808 became the first British envoy to the Kingdom of Kabul.³ Counting only Europeans, the number of documented visitors to Afghanistan, in any capacity, leading up to the first Anglo-Afghan war numbers just twenty-five.⁴

For those who did make the trip, publications often followed. It is safe to say that the most important of these was Elphinstone’s 1808 mission. The two-volume *Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* that resulted from this expedition became a core text within a limited reading list. As *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* lamented as late as 1887, ‘[w]hen he looks over the information available about the county that has been gathered at first hand, the reader will not take long to exhaust it. Elphinstone’s ‘Cabul’, though written sixty years ago, is still a valuable though limited record.’⁵ Despite its limitations as far back as 1887, the work retains its importance to this day. Indeed, reissues of the work correlate with the dates at which Afghanistan has been of significant international concern.

Alongside Elphinstone, two others visitors stand out. They are the soldier, scholar and (eventually) British informant, Charles Masson, and the adventurer and diplomatist Alexander Burnes. These two men, each having

³ Hopkins, ‘The Myth of the ‘Great Game’.

⁴ See Appendix 3 for a list of these individuals from 1793-1839.

⁵ ‘In the Heart of Afghanistan’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, January 1887 - April 1887, 87.

spent more time than any other British officials in Afghanistan, including Elphinstone himself, were seen as ideally placed to inform policy debates that began in the 1830s over how best to deal with the 'Afghanistan question'. Their works are not only a study in the intellectual and cultural history of British understandings of Afghanistan, but they also demonstrate the contested nature of these understandings. I focus on their publications in the second half of this chapter. In the first half I discuss their wider cultural milieu as early European explorers of Afghanistan.

Part One: Early European Explorers of Afghanistan

Approaches to Colonial Knowledge

At the centre of analysis in this chapter lies the published and unpublished works and correspondence of a select group of Europeans whose opinions formed a corpus of knowledge on Afghanistan. Such a focus immediately suggests a methodology familiar to that brought to the fore by Edward Said's *Orientalism*.⁶ It is worth explaining why this approach is not taken here. From the outset the Orientalism school should not be reduced to Said, but his is perhaps the clearest statement of its core tenets: specifically that 'Orientalism' refers to 'the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient ... by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.'⁷ At the centre of this formulation lies the discursive product of the categories of 'east' and 'west' wherein the west is seen as superior to the east. Orientalism is fundamentally a process of 'othering' and the production of representations and categories that rely on this east/west distinction.

The danger with an overly rigid adherence to this approach is firstly that it negates the possibility for intercultural penetration.⁸ According to the Orientalist school (as a critique), for 'the west' - and Europeans in particular - 'the orient' is largely inaccessible to description beyond the productive results of the Orientalist discourse. In fairness, Said does not completely rule out the accessibility of social reality beyond representations, but the emphasis on the internal coherence of the Orientalist discourse - as one of Europeans writing for other Europeans and drawing on European knowledge

⁶ Said, *Orientalism*.

⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

⁸ John M. Mackenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*; Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge*.

to describe the Orient - does reflect the prevailing sense of 'exteriority' that describes the Orientalist critique. By overlooking moments of collaboration, collusion, alliance, and dialogue - including of an epistemic nature - between Europeans and South Asian actors, Orientalism moves us away from the possibility of a local influence on European actors.⁹ This influence was particularly pertinent in those areas in which colonial reach was at its most limited. In these regions British knowledge was at its most parasitic on indigenous networks and local informants. This was undoubtedly inflected with a heavy European bias, but as Bayly highlights, although 'European knowledge may have been hegemonic ... it was never absolute'.¹⁰ The processes of achieving a degree of 'legibility'¹¹ over subject populations, of spatializing, and of mapping was not a process initiated by Europeans, but rather appropriated, warped, and ultimately irrevocably changed by their presence.¹²

This more balanced account isn't to suggest that the representations of Afghanistan through travel accounts do not sit within a wider discourse on the superiority of the west – indeed this is certainly in evidence in the texts – rather the question is what relevance this has to the questions addressed here, specifically those that seek to access the *particularity* in the manner in which Afghanistan came to be known through colonial knowledge. Deploying a blanket narrative of Orientalism threatens to render the genesis of British thinking on Afghanistan merely a function of imperial arrogance, whereas the sources demonstrate a more complex genesis in this mode of understanding. As this chapter will show there was a cultural, intellectual, and practical context within which a more complete understanding of these works can be attained.

⁹ Eugene Irschick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South India, 1795-1895* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press).

¹⁰ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 370.

¹¹ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*,

¹² Irschick, *Dialogue and History*; Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation 1804-1946*, (London, I.B. Tauris, 2000).

The label of 'Orientalism' also threatens to drown out the nuance in European perceptions, offering little insight into which aspects of European representations of the 'other' came to be perceived as more valid. Accessing this requires an approach that pays attention to the intellectual progeny of European observers; an approach that is more dynamic, and more specific. In particular there was a clear attempt to distinguish between the variety of factions that made up 'Afghan' society. The distinctions made between the various tribes and sub-tribes often carried with them an attached value judgement. Certain tribes were considered more regal, learned, or 'civilized' than others. Often this corresponded to their means of self-sufficiency and their proximity to royal authority. These value judgments are frequently contested between the accounts and reveal a degree of latitude in interpretations that Saidian Orientalism does not allow for as a blanket term.

A further aspect of specificity that applies in the case of Afghanistan – and potentially other 'frontier' states – was its exclusion from what might be described as the more pervasive architecture of the colonial state. Afghanistan was never directly colonised and therefore the application of colonial knowledge was always partial and spasmodic. This status often fed representations of Afghanistan and Afghans as something of an 'other' within the 'other'. It is precisely the mystery of the lands beyond the frontier, of Afghanistan as a *terra incognita*, as only ever partially knowable, and always dangerous, that presents Afghanistan as deserving special treatment within the colonial imagination; as perhaps a locution within the wider discourse. To the extent that Anglo-Afghan interactions could be described as dialogic therefore,¹³ this was a fleeting dialogue, constantly vulnerable to a host of background pejorative descriptors that could serve to justify failure and fill in the gaping holes in British understandings.

In drawing lines between the societies they observed it is true that these individuals were developing 'essentialised' categories that would go on to colour British engagements, but the Orientalist critique risks loading the

¹³ Irschick, *Dialogue and History*.

argument too much on the side of the imperialist agenda rather than problematising the development of these categories in the first place. In what follows, I outline the cultural, the intellectual, and the practical worlds of these European explorers in an attempt to describe how their observations were guided by a sense of a shared *mentalité*. But also to highlight how their differences can be explained by diverging cultural, intellectual, and practical situations. This offers a more nuanced appraisal of the manner in which such individuals imagined Afghanistan.

The Cultural World of Early Afghanistan Explorers

The outward march of Britain's colonial frontiers in South Asia during the early to mid-nineteenth century placed a premium on accurate and up to date information on the territories that lay beyond them. In Nepal, Burma, and the Punjab and Afghanistan the British were often 'confronted with a virtual information famine which slowed their advance and sometimes put the whole edifice of their power in peril.'¹⁴ The example of Nepal provides in some ways an instructive case for later problems in Afghanistan. In order to supplement their meagre information on Nepal, the British were compelled to seek alternative sources: travelers, merchants, court servants and religious men amongst them. In the absence of reliable, comprehensive knowledge British understandings often fell back on prejudicial speculation that tended to view the Nepali state 'as a barbarous tyranny from whose thrall the majority of the hill population were waiting to be liberated.'¹⁵ Such hubris would be challenged in the subsequent military intervention when the British would meet with a less than acquiescent population, and a political elite that was impermeable to attempts at infiltration. Faced with the failure of conquest, the British concluded that withdrawal and a system of indirect rule was the best option.

¹⁴ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 97.

¹⁵ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 109.

In Afghanistan, the situation was arguably worse. The paucity of regular European trade meant that individuals travelling to the Kingdom of Kabul were few in number.¹⁶ Early attempts to open information channels with the Afghan government had failed. Meanwhile the geographical challenges of traversing the mountain passes, particularly in winter time, along with the threat of plunder along the way contributed to an information picture that was both 'patchy and tendentious' throughout the 1820s and 1830s.¹⁷ It was into this picture that the travels of early European Afghanistan explorers can be placed.

In truth, the thirst for knowledge on Afghanistan came slightly later than that which related to other 'frontier states'. The early expeditions of Elphinstone to Kabul – as well as his counterpart Henry Pottinger, who was sent to Tehran via Balochistan and Herat – were admittedly driven by concerns over Napoleonic designs on India's north-western perimeter. But this fear was soon diminished.¹⁸ For those who did make the trip, some were disappointed with the official indifference they met upon their return. Edward Stirling, who travelled through Afghanistan in 1828 noted with some dismay in his memoirs on the 'general apathy' prevailing within government at this time complaining that the 'knowledge that I had been in these interesting countries produced no desire for intelligence regarding them, and my reception gave no encouragement for the production of it.'¹⁹ For others, official ambivalence occasionally put their endeavours at risk of failure. The biographer of William Moorcroft described his 1819 expedition as being met with only a 'cold permission' from officials. 'The government of India', he

¹⁶ See Appendices 3 and 4 for a list of these individuals from 1793-1878.

¹⁷ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 131-2.

¹⁸ Jules, Stewart, *On Afghanistan's Plains: The Story of Britain's Afghan Wars* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 3.

¹⁹ Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan*, I, 174. The unfortunate Stirling had been encouraged in his venture by the British envoy at the Court of Tehran, Sir John MacDonald, a noted Russophobe who saw an opportunity to gather intelligence on the routes through Persia and western Afghanistan. Unfortunately MacDonald's enthusiasm was not matched by Company officials in Ludhiana, whereupon arriving twenty-three days after his official period of absence had expired, Stirling was surprised to find that rather than returning to his post, a replacement had been found for him and his pay had been cut by half. J. Leveen Lee, 'The Journals of Edward Stirling in Persia and Afghanistan, 1828-29. Notification of Future Publication', *Journal of Persian Studies*, 24 (1986), 191.

noted, 'never recognized Mr. Moorcroft in any diplomatic capacity, and his supposed assumption of it occasionally incurred their displeasure.'²⁰ The delay that met Moorcroft's request for additional financial support when he was detained in Ladakh prompted an acerbic riposte to the Company's Resident at Delhi from Moorcroft himself: 'In what way I have merited such pointed contempt and abandonment I am yet to learn' he wrote, 'but if I had become obnoxious to you, what had my party done to be involved in the punishment with which I was visited?''²¹

On the one hand, this official indifference disturbs the common perception that such trips were centrally driven by fears of Russian inroads in Central Asia, or that these individuals were somehow players in the opening scenes of the 'great game'. Whilst many of these individuals held their own convictions concerning Russian activity, official recognition of this, at least till the 1830s, was patchy and limited.²² Beyond this observation, the continuance of these trips, despite this indifference, highlights the fact that there was often more to such adventure travel than King and Country.²³ In the case of Moorcroft, a veterinary surgeon of the East India Company, the primary motive was to seek out new breeding stock for the Company's stud from the apparently well-bred steeds of the Turcoman states of Central Asia. Charles Masson was a deserter of the Bengal Army and making his way to Central Asia, partly as a means of escape.²⁴ Meanwhile, even those tasked with official duties could not resist exhibiting more sentimental motives, at least in their published works. James Abbott, a Bengal Artillery officer, remarked that 'the personal narrative of a traveller through the steppes of Tartary could only be interesting, by drawing largely upon his sensations and

²⁰ William Moorcroft and George Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab* (London: William Murray, 1841), xvii, xxviii.

²¹ Moorcroft and Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces*, xl. Moorcroft met further problems later in his trip when the Governor-General George Baring refused his request for an official letter of introduction to the Amir of Bokhara.

²² Rob Johnson, *Spying for Empire: The Great Game in Central and South-East Asia, 1757-1947* (London: Greenhill Books, 2006), 42.

²³ Queen Victoria ascended to the throne in 1837.

²⁴ Bijan Omrani, 'Charles Masson of Afghanistan: Deserter, Scholar, Spy', *Asian Affairs*, 39/2, (2008), 199-216; Whitteridge, Gordon, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan* (Warminster, Wiltshire: Aris and Phillips Ltd., 1986).

emotions'.²⁵ Indeed Abbott was so moved by this aesthetic urge that upon his arrival on the shores of the Caspian he was inspired to write a poem, a surprising choice given the apparently more pressing issue of a Kazakh armed attack that was unfolding at the time.²⁶

Uniting these European travelers was an eagerness to explore the ruins of previous conquering empires, exhibited in a fascination, sometimes bordering on obsession, with Alexander the Great. Those with a classicist persuasion – Godfrey Vigne, Masson, and Burnes in particular – made frequent reference to the geography of Afghanistan in terms of this European historical significance.²⁷ Vigne carried with him copies of Arrian and Quintus Curtius' studies of Alexander, regularly deploying this knowledge in his observations, speculating in one instance that '[i]f Jalalabad be the Nysa of Arrian, as it most likely is, I should certainly think that the Sufyd Koh, or "white mountain", was Mount Meros'.²⁸ Indeed, for Vigne and Masson, who collaborated on their studies in Kabul, Afghanistan seemed to resemble a large-scale archaeological site.

The legacy of Alexander's exploits fascinated too for the rumours of ancient descendents of the Macedonian General living in the remote areas of *kaffiristan* (in present day Nuristan), potentially providing a living museum, geographically sealed off from the surrounding influences of Islam and 'oriental' culture.²⁹ Masson dedicated an entire chapter of his travel account to these mysterious people,³⁰ who it was also suggested might be the fabled

²⁵ James Abbott, *Narrative of a Journey from Herat to Khiva, Moscow, and St Petersburg During the Late Russian Invasion of Khiva* (London: H. Allen and Co., 1843), xvi-xvii.

²⁶ This poem, an ode to empire, Queen, and country, forms the opening to his travel account, although he apparently only had time to write the first two stanzas at the time. Abbott, *Narrative*.

²⁷ Burnes was quite explicit in his desire to 'visit the conquests of Alexander' in the preface to his first travel account: Alexander Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara*, Vol I. (London: John Murray, 1835), ix.

²⁸ Godfrey T. Vigne, *A Personal Narrative of a visit to Ghuzni, Kabul, and Afghanistan*, Second Edition (London: George Routledge, 1843), 10, 232.

²⁹ This particular rumour appears to have originated with Elphinstone. Burnes dissented from this view believing them to be instead the 'aborigines' of Afghanistan, unconnected with Alexander the Great. Burnes, *Travels*, I, 166.

³⁰ Chapter 11, Charles Masson, *Narrative of Various Journeys in Balochistan, Afghanistan, and the Panjab*, Vol. I (London: Richard Bentley, 1842).

'lost tribes of Israel'. Other mythological incentives – albeit of a more fantastical kind - were found in the mysterious *sung-i-fars* or 'philosopher's stone', that was rumoured to be in the region north of the Indus, and reportedly sought by Nawab Jabbur Khan, the *vizier* of Dost Muhammad Khan.³¹

Biblical references abounded too, the Suleiman mountain range that fell between the Derajat north of the Indus, and Afghanistan itself, were reportedly named for their resemblance to King Solomon's throne; a status that afforded them a detour for Elphinstone's mission in 1809.³² The *Safed Koh* (white mountain), south of Jalalabad, and forming part of the *Safed* mountain range that links Peshawar and Kabul was pointed to as the final resting place of Noah's ark.³³ Whilst 'Lamghan' (or Laghman province as it is known today), was identified by Vigne as the resting place of Noah's father.³⁴

These European explorers were not however utterly preoccupied with European cultural signifiers in Afghanistan. As classicists, many of them were interested too in the legacies of Babur and Tamerlane. The significance of these legacies drove a more recent European explorer, Rory Stewart, to follow in the footsteps of some of his European forbears, and Babur himself, in his 2004 travel account *The Places in Between*.³⁵ Animating such works as these is an enduring fascination with a space that appeared to present itself as a paradox: both as a venue for the passing of an incredibly rich civilizational history, yet at the same time interminably viewed as unexplored and awaiting rediscovery. Indeed, many early European explorers were seeking fame in such exploits. Writing to Masson in 1834,

³¹ At the Garden of Ali Murdan Khan, near Peshawar, Burnes reported the claim by local chiefs that the nobleman who prepared the garden had owned the *sung-i-fars* but had opted to throw it into the Indus, 'which at least eases them of the dilemma as to his heir', he noted. Burnes, *Travels*, I, 90, 160.

³² Mountstuart Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul and its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary and India*, Second Edition, Vol. I (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1819), 50-3.

³³ Burnes, *Travels*, I, 117.

³⁴ Vigne was particularly taken with the etymology of Afghan place names and their biblical significance, identifying Kabul with Cain; Dusht-i-Ham with Ham; and Balkh as the grave of Seth. Vigne, *A Personal Narrative*, 205-6, 218.

³⁵ Rory Stewart, *The Places in Between* (London: Picador, 2005).

Henry Pottinger pointed to the recent celebrity status that Burnes had enjoyed in London following the publication of his 1831 journey, expressing the hope that the 'enthusiasm which obtains in Europe regarding the regions in which you are residing ... will perhaps add to your anticipated gratification in hereafter laying your researches before the Public.'³⁶

Perhaps with half a mind on their European audiences, this voyage of (re)discovery was frequently described with richly evocative language. Writing on the view over Kabul from Babur's tomb, Burnes was moved to remark 'I do not wonder at the hearts of the people being captivated by the landscape, and of Baber's admiration, for, in his own words, "its verdure and flowers render Cabool, in spring, a heaven"'.³⁷ Vigne noted how, '[t]he plains of Lombardy as seen from the Apennines, do not exceed the Kohistan of Kabul in richness or brilliancy of verdure'.³⁸ Echoing this Francophone theme and ruminating on the inaccessibility of it all, Conolly was moved to quote Montesquieu - 'Il est triste de voir une belle campagne, sans pouvoir dire à quelqu'un, voilà une belle campagne!'³⁹

This wider imaginative aspect to the manner in which Afghanistan was represented through such texts manifested itself in a variety of ways, and often took on a darker, more pejorative character. Alongside the intrigue and wonder that described this 'unexplored' space sat an unrefined and often violent concept of the people inhabiting these lands, one that gave rise to conflicted observations. As Elphinstone remarked, the 'enthusiasm with which they [the Durrani] speak of the varieties of scenery through which they pass, and of the beauties and pleasures of spring, is such as one can scarce hear, from so unpolished a people, without a surprise.'⁴⁰ He noted the apparent inconsistency between the 'peaceful and social disposition' of the

³⁶ IOR 20876 MSS Eur E161/6-7 (Microfilm), 6a, Pottinger to Burnes, 27 July 1834.

³⁷ Burnes, *Travels*, I, 143.

³⁸ Vigne, *A Personal Narrative*, 217.

³⁹ 'It is a shame to see such beautiful countryside without being able to tell someone, look at this beautiful countryside!' Conolly, Arthur, *Journey to the North of India*, Vol. II (London: Richard Bentley, 1834), 73.

⁴⁰ Elphinstone, Mountstuart, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul and its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary and India*, Vol. II (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1842), 114.

Achikzai tribe and their Pastoral mode of subsistence, combined with their 'predatory and martial spirit'.⁴¹ Masson, in an unusually aesthetical flourish upon arriving in the Khyber region reflected 'I was lost in wonder and rapture on contemplating this serene yet gorgeous display of nature, and awoke from my reverie but to lament that the villany [sic] of man should make a hell where the Creator had designed a paradise, – a train of thought forced upon my mind when I thought of the lawless tribes who dwell in, or wander over these delightful scenes.'⁴²

Accordingly, many European explorers adopted some form of disguise for fear of the perceived inherent rapacity of these 'lawless tribes'. Burnes, travelling with a small retinue of 'native' companions opted for local dress yet retaining the identity of a European if pressed. Masson, having originally attempted to disguise his '*feringhi*' (foreigner) status, discovered to his surprise that being open about his identity afforded him 'better treatment' since it avoided his being mistaken for an 'infidel Sikh' or a Hindu.⁴³ J. P. Ferrier, who was the first European to voluntarily travel through Afghanistan in the aftermath of the first Anglo-Afghan war and publish his account, was perhaps the most at risk. To his perpetual annoyance the French General was repeatedly mistaken for an Englishman.⁴⁴

The extent to which this 'Orientalist' discourse was in evidence depended on the individual – personality mattered – but it was also determined in part by location. Before an extant border existed between the territories of this region, European explorers frequently imparted a sense of crossing the Rubicon upon their entry into Afghan territory. Within the loosely defined territory itself this movement became distinguished by tribal descriptions.

⁴¹ As was frequently the case with Elphinstone, this was passed off with a comparison to the Scottish clansmen (in this case those of the Scottish border) where 'the songs of its inhabitants alternately exult in the pillage and havoc of a foray, and breathe the softest and tenderest sentiments of love and purity.' For good measure Elphinstone, threw in a further example of the Arcadians 'from whom we draw all our notions of the golden age of shepherds', but were also 'a warlike race'. Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 116.

⁴² Masson, *Narrative*, I, 85.

⁴³ Masson, *Narrative*, I, 79, 82. This became apparent as Masson made his way into the areas north of the Indus that had been contested by the Afghans and Sikhs for some time.

⁴⁴ J. P. Ferrier, *Caravan Journeys and Wanderings in Persia, Afghanistan, Turkistan, and Beloochistan* (London: John Murray, 1856).

Accordingly, guided by local trackers or by the works of European trailblazers, these explorers were often aware of when they were moving into new territories and the implications of this. Certain regions of the 'land of the Afghans' were marked out as particularly lawless. The inhabitants of the Khyber Pass, or 'khyberees' as the British referred to them, were regularly cast in such light; 'a race of notorious thieves' as one observer summarized.⁴⁵ Elphinstone was perhaps most informative in outlining this ethnographic cartography of danger:

'The tribes most addicted to rapine in the West are the Atchukzye branch of the Dooraunees, and those of the Noorzyes, who inhabit the desert [sic] country on the borders of Persia and Belochistan, and that part of the Tokhee branch of the Ghiljies ... The lands of the rest might be passed with a tolerable safety, unless in times of great confusion ... The pastoral tribes in the West are said to be more given both to robbery and theft, than those who live by agriculture. All the tribes of the range of Solimaun, especially the Khyberees and the Vizeerees, are notorious plunderers, and rob under the express direction or sanction of their internal government. The other Eastern Afghauns are all disposed to plunder when they dare. When quite free from all apprehension of the royal power, they openly rob on the highway. When their security is not so great, they levy exorbitant customs, or beg in a manner that is not to be refused, and steal when they dare not rob; but for a considerable extent round the towns a traveler is tolerably safe under the protection of the royal authority.'⁴⁶

This was not purely an imaginative exercise; much of this fear was borne out of experience. Masson, for example, came to lose his possessions on a number of occasions. Elsewhere, the reputation for rebellion was willingly communicated to European travelers as with the 'Khyberree chief' that Burnes referred to, who described his country as 'Yaghistan' or 'land of the rebels'.⁴⁷ But such occurrences and such characteristics became reified and transposed to a general 'character' of the Afghans themselves. The Afghans, Conolly wrote, 'are all expert thieves, and, like the Spartans of old, only know shame in detection; that is, in being detected before they have accomplished their

⁴⁵ Moorcroft and Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces*, 348.

⁴⁶ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 362-3.

⁴⁷ Burnes, *Travels*, I, 113.

robbery; for afterwards, it is a very good joke with them.’⁴⁸ The Europeans were often at their most offensive, and their most conflicted, when attempting to outline this character. In an oft-quoted section Elphinstone declared: ‘To sum up the character of the Afghauns in a few words; their vices are revenge, envy, avarice, rapacity, and obstinacy; on the other hand, they are fond of liberty, faithful to their friends, kind to their dependants, hospitable, brave, hardy, frugal, laborious, and prudent; and they are less disposed than the nations in their neighbourhood to falsehood, intrigue, and deceit.’⁴⁹

Arriving in Afghanistan in the early decades of the nineteenth century then, these early European explorers were carrying with them a heavy load in the form of cultural baggage. Absent any significant body of preexisting knowledge on these regions, and driven by a sense of mystery and danger, these individuals drew upon their own cultural signifiers; memories of home; antiquity; religion; and a loosely formed battery of oriental stereotypes. The impact of this initial foray was significant to the extent that it set the tone for future visitors. As it transpired, this impact would be magnified by the sheer absence of European outsiders visiting Afghanistan post-1842 due to the perceived danger. Therefore, in a process similar to that observed by Priya Satia with respect to the later exploration of Arabia, before Afghanistan became a cartographic definition it was beginning to resemble, to the British, ‘a geographic and cultural imaginary’.⁵⁰ Driving this was a ‘cultural formation’; ‘a particular set of ideas and cultural concepts’; perhaps even ‘a *mentalité*’.⁵¹ But this formation remained a loose, ethereal collection of ‘free floating’ concepts and stereotypes, informed not so much by ‘science’ as by sentiment. As suggested in the introduction, this is only half the story. Alongside this ‘imaginary’ cultural baggage was carried an intellectual baggage that allowed a more concrete definition of Afghanistan to be recorded. As well as operating in an imaginary register, Afghanistan

⁴⁸ Conolly, *Journey*, II, 69.

⁴⁹ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 400.

⁵⁰ Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, 14.

⁵¹ Satia, *Spies in Arabia*, 12.

explorers, and particularly those schooled in the methods of the newly bureaucratizing East India Company, were operating in an intellectual register of surveying and information-gathering.⁵² This aspect is turned to next.

Intellectual Worlds

Whilst the more imaginative aspects outlined above were largely an unintentional aspect of the works of European explorers of Afghanistan, the more data-driven aspects of their collective enterprise were deliberate. The style and substance of this empirical quest varied depending on the particular intellectual trends of the time, and the particular educational background of the individual in question, but all viewed their activities in this regard as resembling in part a 'scientific' endeavour. For those whose research did not meet with official interest, the public bodies of the Asiatic Societies in India, and later on the Royal Geographic Society in London, were avid consumers of new geographic findings. Indeed many explorers published sections of their works in the journals of these public bodies. Masson and Burnes in particular found an outlet to boost their future book sales in this respect. Moorcroft's equine pursuits also opened up avenues in the Agricultural Societies of Calcutta and the Board of Agriculture in England.⁵³

One of the more striking features of these European travel accounts is the sheer volume of data they carry. This style was not simply an extreme form of empiricism, but was rooted in a wider intellectual *milieu* of colonial knowledge collection.⁵⁴ To a greater degree than his successors, Elphinstone exhibited the intellectual trends heralded by the Scottish Enlightenment, and

⁵² Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*; Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*; Irshick, *Dialogue and History*.

⁵³ Moorcroft's papers were first sent to the Asiatic Society of Calcutta upon his death in 1825. Moorcroft and Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces*, xxvii, li.

⁵⁴ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*.

a collection of techniques and methodologies associated with what Jane Rendell has termed 'Scottish Orientalism'.⁵⁵ Inspired by the works of Adam Smith and under the tutelage of Dugald Stewart at Edinburgh, Elphinstone and his peers were taught the importance of identifying the interrelationships between all aspects of man's life within society: economic, political, cultural and social. The object was to ascertain at what stage of development the society could be said to exist (hunting; pastoral; agricultural; or commercial), and necessitated a wealth of collected data, including historical trajectories.⁵⁶ This particular brand of academic orientalism exhibited two central themes. Firstly, there was a focus on comparative philology. Language, it was believed, offered a series of clues to the developmental history of societies including their interpenetration with other, perhaps ostensibly more 'developed' societies. Closely linked with this was the second, and related intellectual tradition of 'philosophical' or 'conjectural' history which suggested that through the accumulation of a wealth of data, it was possible to reconstruct the development of these societies, and what is more, identify affinities with societies elsewhere.⁵⁷ These methods created a generic set of interpretations by which it was proposed 'Asiatics' could be judged.⁵⁸

This epistemic imperialism was therefore mediated by a European conception of what social 'science' looked like, and at times this included European conceptual categories. Yet in addition there was a cross fertilization of ideas drawn from 'academic orientalism'⁵⁹ – an importation of notions developed from the more prolonged European contact with Indian princely states, as well as the influence of knowledge developed on Persian communities. Both tendencies demonstrated an attempt at the crafting of a

⁵⁵ Jane Rendell, 'Scottish Orientalism: from Robertson to James Mill', *The Historical Journal*, 25:1 (1982), pp. 43-69. Rendell uses the term 'Orientalism' in both its academic sense as the nineteenth century study of the 'Orient', as well as in the Saidian sense as the corporate institution for the western study of the east.

⁵⁶ Rendell, 'Scottish Orientalism'.

⁵⁷ Rendell, 'Scottish Orientalism'; Ballantyne, 'Re-reading the Archive and Opening up the Nation-State', 115.

⁵⁸ Said, *Orientalism*.

⁵⁹ As opposed to what Said calls 'imaginative' orientalism: A 'style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"'. Said, *Orientalism*. 2

'science of the concrete',⁶⁰ converting this *terra incognita* into a more familiar 'realm of possibility'.⁶¹ Tribal groupings were duly documented, as well as their geographical spread. These categorizations encompassed patrilineal, ethnic, and dynastic descent. Groups were also distinguished by their confessional identities (Sunni or Shi'a); by the geographical nature of their territories (highlands or plains); as well as their mode of subsistence. This, latter category in turn brought to the fore a distinction between nomadic and settled populations. Whereas elsewhere in India, the term 'tribe' conjured up a sense of illegitimacy, Afghanistan presented an entire society build on such lineage structures. The nomadic population therefore provided an 'other' against which to pitch the 'other', thereby allowing the crafting of a particular 'civi-territorial complex'⁶² wherein the authority of settled communities was seen as superior to the nomadic populations, simply because it implied a sense of ownership over a defined space. This logic of land ownership as political legitimacy, which drew on Rousseau's social contract theory, was apparent in equivalent travel narratives elsewhere, including Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, in which native Americans were also painted as 'nomads'.⁶³ Territory and civilization were thereby mutually reinforcing, creating a place and space: the 'land of the Afghans'.

The British view of the polity and society of Afghanistan was in part a reflection of intellectual fashions, and in part the importation of familiar models of South Asian (and Persian) societal development. Moreover, this methodology had the effect of infusing colonial histories of foreign territories with imported notions of legitimacy. Through conjectural history the development of a political community was often viewed through these accounts as the history of the rise of one elite group over another. This would become of significant importance in later attempts to identify which groups

⁶⁰ The term is borrowed from Claude Levi-Strauss, quoted in Said, *Orientalism*, 53.

⁶¹ Robert A. Stafford, 'Scientific Exploration and Empire' in Andrew Porter and Alaine Low (eds.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume III, The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 311.

⁶² William E. Connolly, 'Tocqueville, Territory, and Violence' in Michael J. Shapiro and Hayward R. Alker (eds.), *Challenging Boundaries* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 141-64.

⁶³ Connolly, 'Tocqueville, Territory, and Violence',

to ally with. When it came to interacting with these communities the British were therefore crafting their own structures of significance, interpreted through their own culturally located intellectual understandings.

Practical Worlds

Elphinstone's *Account* was by far the most comprehensive and complete of these works and although his intellectual roots would soon be subsumed by a shift towards Anglo-German schools of philological thought, and the wider rise to prominence of English utilitarianism,⁶⁴ his status as the foremost colonial expert on Afghan matters had a strong influence on subsequent works. Rather than retracing his steps, subsequent explorers would often attempt to describe events subsequent to his account, or to travel routes and explore regions that his work had not covered.⁶⁵ Many explorers encountered his influence on the ground too, meeting individuals who had been co-opted by the network of informants he set up to gather information.⁶⁶

Elphinstone himself never ventured beyond Peshawar and therefore relied heavily on so-called 'native informants'.⁶⁷ This approach to information procurement was not simply a matter of practicality but reflected the methods by which the colonial state was familiarizing itself with Asian peoples at this time through embedding itself within preexisting information systems, societal groups, and geographically mobile networks and

⁶⁴ Rendell, 'Scottish Orientalism'. In 1832 the first chair for Sanskrit studies opened at Oxford University marking a geographical shift for the centre of Philology in Great Britain from Scotland (Edinburgh) to England. The first holder of this chair, Horace Hayman Wilson, would later become the collator and editor of William Moorcroft and George Trebeck's *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces*. He co-wrote *Ariana Antiqua*, on the coins and antiquities of Afghanistan, with Charles Masson. He was also acknowledged for his contributions to Burnes' published works. Burnes, *Travels*, I, xv.

⁶⁵ E.g. Burnes, *Travels*, I, 89-90; Masson, *Narrative*, I, 80; Moorcroft and Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces*, II, 376.

⁶⁶ Masson, *Narrative*, I, 46, 127; Vigne, *A Personal Narrative*, 380-1; Burnes, *Travels*, I, 162; Moorcroft and Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces*, I, xxxii.

⁶⁷ Hanifi, 'Shah Shuja's Hidden History'.

diasporas.⁶⁸ At the fringes of British influence, where Company power was at its most tenuous (if not non-existent), European explorers relied heavily on co-opted local figures and Indian collaborators. Not only did this aid in the translation of an unfamiliar cultural terrain, but it also often provided a degree of safety. William Moorcroft's 1819 venture, for example, was almost entirely reconnoitered in advance by Mir Izatullah Khan who set out in 1812 and would join the later venture too.⁶⁹ Moorcroft was also accompanied by Ghulam Haidar Khan, a Pathan horse trader, and he drew on links with the Pathan horse trading community to ease his progress from Delhi to Lahore and beyond.⁷⁰ Burnes travelled with Mohan Lal, a Kashmiri Brahmin and a new breed of Indian *munshi*⁷¹ well connected as a descendent of the Delhi nobility, educated at Delhi College, and lauded by colonial officials as evidence for the potential positive impact effect of European ideas on Indian society.⁷²

These local informants (or at least more 'local' than the British) provided an interface between the European worldview and the South Asian episteme. The British therefore tended to experience what they saw not only through the lens of their own intellectual culture, but also through the inflections that were a result of their informants. In addition, in the absence of any form of official conveyance, many of the more itinerant explorers embedded themselves in local mobile populations. Masson, Burnes, and Vigne, for instance each exploited to varying degrees *kafila* (caravan) routes, especially those of the Lohani merchants, a community of Afghan pastoralists who traversed the trade routes between India, Kabul, and the northern markets of

⁶⁸ Bayly, *Empire and Information*; Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge*.

⁶⁹ Moorcroft and Trebeck, *Travels*, I; Johnson, *Spying for Empire*, 41-8; Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 135.

⁷⁰ Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 133, 135.

⁷¹ Although *munshi* translates approximately to 'secretary' this does not cover the scope of their role in this context. As descendents of the Mughal era court scribes, *munshis* were employed by the British initially as Persian language instructors, then increasingly as expert advisors on 'diplomacy and social comportment'. Between 1820 and 1850 a new type of *munshi*, educated within the British system began to emerge. Mohan Lal was an example of this latter type. Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 75 (on *munshis*), 229-33 (on 'new' *munshis*).

⁷² Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 133, 230-2.

Central Asia.⁷³ The commercial instincts of this community in particular, and their potential usefulness as a source of up-to-date information left a favourable impression on their European guests, and buttressed the British view that Afghanistan could function as a trade corridor in Company interests.⁷⁴

Through embedding themselves in such larger groups explorers also came into contact with local elites through the payment of transit duties as they travelled through the towns and villages on the route. This provided numerous opportunities for the collection of political insight, albeit from what was likely to be a partial narrative. Masson, and others, also integrated into networks of roving religious notables, teachers (*mullahs*), pilgrims (*hajis*), and spiritual leaders (*pirs*), the latter often being in the employ of political elites and therefore also knowledgeable on political affairs. These religious figures also filled a diplomatic role in arbitrating disputes between competing communities.⁷⁵

Through such networks the British were gaining insight into the power of indigenous information systems that outclassed anything the British could construct through their own tenuous system of informants. The arrival of European travelers in major population areas was often anticipated by the rulers of these towns who would regularly invite the *feringhi* travelers for discussions. This elite engagement offered telling moments of dialogue and exchange. The explorers were regularly courted as official representatives despite their protestations to the contrary, and often solicited for assistance in local power struggles. In a surprisingly prescient example, Shah Shuja addressed Elphinstone on his wish for an alliance with the British upon the

⁷³ Masson, I, *Narrative*, 67-8; Vigne, *A Personal Narrative*, 2, 41-2, 53, 104, 118; Burnes, *Travels*, III, 335-6.

⁷⁴ As Vigne offered, 'I look upon the Lohanis as the most respectable of the Mahomedans, and the most worthy of the notice and assistance of our countrymen.' Vigne, *A Personal Narrative*, 118. See also Burnes, *Travels*, III, 335-6.

⁷⁵ For instance the *saiyid* mentioned by Masson who arbitrated between Kandahar and the Hazara communities to the north of the city. Masson, *Narrative*, II, 357.

withdrawal of the embassy in 1809.⁷⁶ Masson was offered the position of *vizier* under by Taj Muhammad Khan Khakar, or Haji Khan as he was commonly known - the governor of Bisut, in the Hazarajat, west of Kabul, and a rival to Dost Muhammad Khan.⁷⁷ Vigne was courted by Nawab Jabbar Khan, a deputy to Dost Muhammad Khan, and later a key intelligence provider to the British.⁷⁸ Whilst these encounters served to perpetuate a British perception of the inherently 'intriguing' nature of the Afghan political community, such openness and political fluidity also gave the impression that there were opportunities for manipulation.

Engagement with elites also gave the opportunity for the consultation of local histories, including scriptural accounts. Elphinstone appeared to derive much from consultation of the genealogical histories of the founding father of the Afghan nation, Qais Abdur Rashid.⁷⁹ Likewise, Vigne benefitted from the reading of the *majma' al-ansab* (collection of genealogies) by Mullah Khoda Dad during his stay in Kabul.⁸⁰ At a more local level, interactions with prominent community leaders allowed the collection of local folk tales and myths. For example (and perhaps reflecting their innate fear of the environment), many of the explorers reported stories of the apparently deadly 'pestilential wind' called the 'simoom',⁸¹ 'simum',⁸² or 'sirrocco',⁸³ that seemingly originated somewhere on the plains between Jalalabad and Kabul.⁸⁴ Whilst the recording of such story-telling was perhaps meant to

⁷⁶ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 113. This request was preceded by a similar request from Shuja's court officials for a British alliance against the then ruler of Persia, Shah Mahmud. Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 372.

⁷⁷ Masson, *Narrative*, II. 360-1.

⁷⁸ Vigne, *Personal Narrative*, 149-50; Hanifi, 'Shah Shuja's Hidden History', 12.

⁷⁹ As he later noted, 'they [the Afghans] are very proud of their descent; a great part of their histories is taken up by genealogies; they will hardly acknowledge a man for an Afghaun, who cannot make his proofs by going back six or seven generations'. Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 253, 398; Caroe, *The Pathans*; Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 24-5.

⁸⁰ Vigne, *Personal Narrative*, 166-7.

⁸¹ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 224; Burnes, *Travels*, I, 120.

⁸² Moorcroft and Trebeck, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces*, II, 356.

⁸³ Ferrier, *Caravan Journeys*, 272-3.

⁸⁴ As Elphinstone relates: 'When a man is caught in it, it generally occasions instant death. The sufferer falls senseless, and blood bursts from his mouth, nose and ears. His life is sometimes saved, by administering a strong acid, or by immersing him in water. The people in places where the simoom is frequent, eat garlic, and rub their lips and noses with it, when they go out in the heat of the summer, to prevent their suffering by the simoom.' Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 225.

indicate the natural superstition of the Afghans, and undermine their supposed capacity for 'rational' or 'scientific' thought, it also indicated the reliance on local informants, and raises the intriguing conundrum as to the capacity of the Europeans to distinguish between myth and reality; substance and spin.

The recording of these oral histories reveals much in terms of the manner in which European observations were conditioned by their reliance on elites, and by their own worldviews. The explorers, quite inadvertently it seems, imposed an artificial distinction between the validity of these histories. As such, the stories of religiously or spiritually-inspired leaders were often relayed with a dismissive tone, or attributed to 'fanaticism'.⁸⁵ Such was the case with *saiyid* Ahmed Shah, of the Yusufzai territories, who Masson dismissed in his account as a 'celebrated fanatic and imposter', driven by an assumed 'delegated power from above to exterminate the Sikhs and make himself master of the Panjab, Hindostan, and of China'.⁸⁶ This interpretation was offered despite the *saiyid's* minor role in the rise to power of Dost Muhammad Khan who was in contact with him. Ahmed Shah's religiously-inspired attempts on Peshawar helped to distract the rival brothers of Dost Muhammad Khan who ruled that city.

However, political histories that were communicated by ostensibly more creditable sources, learned men, court officials, or prominent local leaders – particularly those that avoided suggestions of fanaticism or irrationality – were afforded more-or-less official status. A key example here, explored in more detail in the second half of this chapter, is the rise to power of the Barakzai tribal federation, against the dominant Saddozai, in response to the extremely violent murder of Fitih Khan, a prominent Barakzai leader, and deputy to the ruler of Kabul. Both Masson and Burnes, arguably shaped by

⁸⁵ An example is Masson's account of Muhammad Shah Khan, 'a simple weaver, who rose one morning, and fancied himself destined to be padshah [King] of Delhi. Grasping his musket, he left his house alone, shot the two or three first men he met, to show that he was in earnest, and took the road to Kabal. Before reaching Ferzah he had been joined by several, and then crowds began to flock in to him'. Masson, *Narrative*, III, 123.

⁸⁶ Masson, *Narrative*, III, 75-6.

their engagement with ruling Barakzai elites, documented this account in a manner favourable to the new rulers, as Burnes described it, a 'tragedy ... without parallel in modern times'.⁸⁷ The shout of the Wazir Fiti Khan, as he was murdered, Masson imparted, 'was that of the expiring Afghan monarchy'. Fiti Khan's death, he said, had bequeathed to the Barakzai, 'the ample means of securing their independence, and at the same time of avenging him'.⁸⁸

It would be impossible to check the historical accuracy of such accounts, what matters for our purposes here is that the British recorded such oral histories partly through the lens of their own conceptions of what constituted a legitimate political order. This in turn was shaped by the sources they drew upon, and the narratives those sources offered. In short, these accounts were a narrative product of encounter. But to take a broader view of such histories, they offer a glimpse into what David Edwards has described as the competing 'moral orders' that have long defined Afghan political culture; orders that he argues are visible in precisely such histories.⁸⁹ Driven by their European ideas of a legitimate political order, the British tended to ignore those that could be passed off as 'fanaticism' and focused on those narratives that accorded with a straight forward understanding of one dynastic group (i.e. the Barakzai) in competition with another (i.e. the Saddozai). The works of European travelers were already beginning to impose certain interpretations on Afghan politics that would evolve into the received wisdom of colonial knowledge.

Conclusion: A Knowledge Community?

The first half of this chapter has introduced the works of early European explorers. These works, it has been argued, resemble the tentative

⁸⁷ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 241.

⁸⁸ Masson, *Narrative*, III, 35.

⁸⁹ Edwards describes these 'moral faultlines' as 'honour', Islam, and 'rule'. David B. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Faultlines on the Afghan Frontier* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1996).

beginnings of British engagement with Afghanistan in the nineteenth century. Understanding how the British were beginning to familiarize themselves with Afghanistan at this time requires a move beyond the standard tropes of the 'Orientalist' critique. The British did view Afghans as inferior, but the specifics of how they viewed Afghanistan derived from more than imperial western arrogance. European explorers carried with them shared cultural signifiers with which they navigated the unfamiliar terrain of Afghanistan; they deployed shared intellectual currents in interpreting their findings; and they adopted similar practices of engagement with collaborators in collecting new information and knowledge. In each of these areas British understandings were being shaped in a manner that was specific to the Afghanistan case.

These individuals did not simply share common approaches in theory, they consumed one another's works too, occasionally encountering the legacies of earlier European explorers on the ground and in some cases coordinating their activities in person. As such, in the early nineteenth century there were the beginnings of an emergent Afghanistan colonial knowledge community.

Part Two: Knowledge Entrepreneurs

Having described the cultural, intellectual, and practical worlds of early European explorers of Afghanistan we now turn to the work of Elphinstone, Burnes, and Masson as examples of how these worldviews manifested themselves in the observations of key figures. I describe these individuals as 'knowledge entrepreneurs' as they were particularly influential in their delineation of what was considered received wisdom on Afghanistan by policy-makers. The wider Afghanistan knowledge community that these figures were members of reflect some of the characteristics familiar to what Peter Haas has termed 'epistemic communities': 'a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area'.⁹⁰

Mountstuart Elphinstone and The 'Elphinstonian Episteme'

In assessing the significance of Elphinstone's mission there is a tendency to emphasize its diplomatic motivations.⁹¹ The year-long expedition sought as its primary goal an engagement with the court of Shah Shuja ul Mulk, at that time the ruler of Afghanistan, and as Elphinstone acknowledged the mission was throughout 'employed in such inquiries [sic] regarding the kingdom of Caubul as were likely to be useful to the British Government.'⁹² The wider strategic rationale for this, as also made explicit in the account, were the acquisitive movements of France in Asia, notably the presence of the Embassy of General Gardanne in Persia. It is worth pointing out however, that the zenith of France's imperial menace in the region had arguably passed by the time of the mission in October 1808. The prospect of a French force

⁹⁰ Peter Haas, 'Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination', *International Organization*, 46/1 (1992), 3.

⁹¹ Stewart, *On Afghanistan's Plains*; Norris, *The First Afghan War*.

⁹² Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1842), v.

crossing the Indus in 1808 had been rendered all but impossible following Napoleon's retreat from the Middle East.⁹³ By 1809 the signing of the Anglo-Persian treaty had constituted a defence pact, cancelling Persian treaties with other European states, and compelling the Shah of Persia not to enter 'engagements inimical to Britain or 'pregnant with injury and disadvantage' to British territories in India.'⁹⁴ The Franco-Russian alliance notwithstanding, the prospect of a Russian threat at this time was arguably more of a post-facto rationalisation.

This then, was the grand strategic context in which Elphinstone eventually signed his 1809 treaty with Shah Shuja, at Peshawar, which at that time was the winter capital of the Kingdom. To get to Peshawar, Elphinstone and his embassy had covered much ground. With an embassy numbering over 300 and made up largely of native infantry and cavalry soldiers, Elphinstone had left Delhi on 13 October 1808 and headed west towards Bikaner. From there they swung north-west to Multan in modern day Pakistan, or the Punjab as it was then known. By 7 January 1809 they were crossing the Indus river south of Dera Ismail Khan at Kahiri. The final leg of the journey saw them following the Indus river north to Peshawar where Elphinstone met with Shah Shuja. As the two men put it in their treaty agreement, the 'veil of separation' was to be 'lifted up from between them, and they shall in no manner interfere in each other's countries'.⁹⁵ Despite such optimism the treaty was soon after rendered null and void after Shuja was ousted by his brother Mahmud. Shuja was eventually exiled in Ludhiana under the protection of a British pension. The ructions that led to this state of affairs were experienced by Elphinstone himself whilst the mission was stationed in Peshawar, leading to their eventual retreat.

As such, the status of the Afghan state was in a process of flux at the exact moment at which the East India Company was attempting to form diplomatic ties. This fact was not lost on Elphinstone who remarked at Peshawar that

⁹³ Stewart, *On Afghanistan's Plains*, 3.

⁹⁴ Cited in Norris, *The First Afghan War*, 13.

⁹⁵ Norris, *The First Afghan War*, 14.

‘although some things (the appearance of the King in particular) exceeded my expectations, others fell far short of them, and all bore less the appearance of a state in prosperity, than of a splendid monarchy in decline.’⁹⁶ Indeed, despite the weaknesses of the British information system with regard to Afghanistan at this time, certain diasporic networks were functioning. Opponents of Shuja were lobbying the British in Delhi with regard to his replacement. This information was being transmitted to the Elphinstone embassy at Peshawar, confirming the Afghan ruler’s precarious position.⁹⁷

Fortunately for Elphinstone, diplomacy was not the sole purpose of his visit. Amongst his cohort were those employed for the cartographic, botanic, historic, and economic study of the territory under the Kingdom of Kabul.⁹⁸ At Peshawar these individuals fanned out across the country or sought informants to carry out their research for them. Elphinstone reserved the study of the government and its people for himself, but never ventured any further than Peshawar. The collated result of these studies was a nine-volume exhaustive account that was eventually distilled down into two volumes published in 1815.⁹⁹ Given the breadth of this study and its impact, it is surprising that Elphinstone’s work, and his career in a wider sense, has escaped more substantial academic attention.¹⁰⁰ The one recent exception to this is Benjamin Hopkins. For Hopkins, Elphinstone was the progenitor of *the* framework of understanding for colonial officials getting to grips with Afghanistan as a policy problem. He labels this framework the ‘Elphinstonian Episteme’.¹⁰¹ But how this ‘episteme’ was developed, and how it connected with wider policy-making merits further attention. The first area in which

⁹⁶ Elphinstone, *Account*, II, (1842), 83-4.

⁹⁷ Hanifi, ‘Shah Shuja’s ‘Hidden History’’, 8.

⁹⁸ Details of the individual roles of the embassy representatives can be found in the preface of the 1842 edition, pages v-vi. For the makeup of the Embassy staff and its military escort see pages 1-2.

⁹⁹ Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War*, 26.

¹⁰⁰ The only exception appears to be a biography by Thomas Colebrooke published in 1884 and republished in 2011. The book was based on an earlier 1861 article in *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. Thomas E. Colebrooke, *Life of the Honourable Mountstuart Elphinstone*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2011); Sir Edward Colebrooke, ‘Memoir of the Honourable Mountstuart Elphinstone’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 18 (1861), 221-344.

¹⁰¹ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*.

this was achieved concerns the 'where' of the Afghan polity, specifically its territory.

BOUNDING AFGHANISTAN

In describing the territorial limits of Afghanistan Elphinstone was aware that he was facing a challenge. 'It is difficult to fix the limits of the kingdom of Caubul', he wrote. 'The countries under the sovereignty of the King of Caubul, once extended ... from Sirhind, about one hundred and fifty miles from Delly, to Meshhed, about an equal distance from the Caspian sea. In breadth they reached from the Oxus to the Persian gulph ... But this great empire has, of late, suffered a considerable diminution, and the distracted state of the government prevents the King's exercising authority even over several of the countries which are still included in his dominions.'¹⁰² To overcome this ambiguity Elphinstone applied what he considered to be an appropriate measure: 'In this uncertainty I shall adopt the test made use of by the Asiatics themselves, and shall consider the King's sovereignty as extending over all the countries in which the Khootba¹⁰³ is read and the money coined in his name.'¹⁰⁴

Given this definition it is perhaps not surprising that Elphinstone's cartographer produced the map of 'The Kingdom of Caubul' (see Appendix 5). This was an attempt to territorialize Shah Shuja's Kingdom based on sovereign influence, yet it did not take account of the particular nature of that rule, nor indeed the fact that this influence was rapidly shrinking.

In order to more carefully delineate this complicated picture, Elphinstone also provided a description of the territorial reach of the 'country of the

¹⁰² Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 138.

¹⁰³ As per the original: 'The Khootba is part of the Mahommedan service, in which the king of the country is prayed for. Inserting a prince's name in the Khootba, and inscribing it on the current coin, are reckoned in the East the most certain acknowledgement of sovereignty.' Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 138.

¹⁰⁴ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 138.

Afghauns'. He described this as bounded by the Hindu Kush in the north, the Indus river in the east, Sewestan in the south, and the Seistan desert in the west.¹⁰⁵ The physical geography, Elphinstone noted, was linked to Afghanistan's political geography. Thus the mountain dwellers exhibited a greater degree of freedom, and a higher propensity for 'turbulence' than those who lived on the plains and under the control of the King.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, cities presented a more ordered society, where '[t]he peculiar institutions of the Afghan tribes are superseded by the existence of a strong government, regular courts of law, and an efficient police.'¹⁰⁷ This was perhaps due to the more heterogeneous nature of these population centres. The towns were observed to be mainly populated by non-Afghans. Elphinstone noted that 'the only Afghanus who reside in towns, are great men and their followers, soldiers, Moollahs, a few who follow commerce ... and some of the poorest of the nation who work as labourers.' That said, Afghans did not apparently consider mercantile pursuits to beneath them, as did Persians or Indians for example. A prohibition against Muslims profiting from interest on loans meant that much of the business of banking was done by Hindus. The larger population centres therefore exhibited an even greater degree of cosmopolitanism. Kandahar, for example, was home to Tajiks, Aimaks, Hindus, Persians, Balochis, Uzbeks, Arabs, Armenians, and Jews.¹⁰⁸

'NATION', 'TRIBE' AND AFGHAN SOCIETY

Whilst the 'Kingdom of Kabul' referred to those areas under the sovereign authority of the King, this authority was ambiguous, and the 'country' of the Afghans referred to a more geographically-defined concept. But the most significant division that Elphinstone faced in describing the Afghan 'nation' was that of the tribes:

¹⁰⁵ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 150-1.

¹⁰⁶ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 3.

¹⁰⁷ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 133.

¹⁰⁸ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 133.

The description, which I have attempted, of the country of the Afghans, has been rendered difficult by the great variety of the regions to be described, and by the diversity even of contiguous tracts. No less a diversity will be discovered in the people who inhabit it; and, amidst the contrasts that are apparent, in the government, manners, dress, and habits of the different tribes, I find it difficult to select those great features, which all possess in common, and which give a marked national character to the whole of the Afghans.¹⁰⁹

As discussed in Part One of this chapter, Elphinstone's Edinburgh University education had schooled him in the best traditions of the Scottish enlightenment, yet prior to his arrival in India in 1795 he had shown little apparent knowledge or interest in oriental scholarship.¹¹⁰ At this time, East India Company officials were making the steady transformation 'from traders into bureaucrats',¹¹¹ and Elphinstone belonged to a cohort who cut their teeth in the oversight of revenue collection reform in order to provide some stability to Company finances. These individuals, who included Thomas Munro, Mark Wilks, and Charles Metcalfe, developed accordingly a preoccupation with the village. As Metcalfe noted: 'The village communities are little republics, having nearly every thing they can want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations ... Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds to revolution; ... but the village community remains the same'.¹¹² Elphinstone, a contemporary of Metcalfe, appeared to deploy this logic in his observations of Afghan tribal governance too.

For Elphinstone, the tribe was central to understanding Afghan society. As he put it, 'each tribe has a government of its own, and constitutes a complete commonwealth within itself'.¹¹³ The basic tribal unit was identified as an *ooloos*, a term which could apply to either an entire tribe, or a sub-unit of a tribe. Each *ooloos* was headed by a *Khan*, who was drawn from the oldest family within that community. This selection was made by the King, or 'elected by the people', depending on the extent to which that grouping was

¹⁰⁹ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 238.

¹¹⁰ Rendell, 'Scottish Orientalism', 48.

¹¹¹ Irschick, *Dialogue and History*, 13.

¹¹² Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 28.

¹¹³ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 253.

under the authority of the King. In either case, the selection was made on the basis of age, experience and character.¹¹⁴ These moments of competition could prompt a fragmentation as factions emerged under competing would-be leaders. If the King was involved in the decision these leaders could, if necessary, try to influence the court by offering terms of submission or by bribing ministers of court. In certain circumstances, even when the decision had been made, the disenfranchised group could form alliances with rival clans, thus further splintering the *oolooss*. Ultimately, these could include rivals to the throne itself.

Despite this top-down influence, the primary governing body of the *oolooss* was the *jirga*, a consultative body for important decisions affecting the community, including the selection of a *Khan*. *Jirgas* existed for each subdivision with the chiefs of each significant division sitting on the principal *jirga* for the *oolooss*. This institution betrayed the essentially communitarian nature of the tribes. Although *Khans* could take a more dictatorial role they were generally constrained by the communitarian nature of tribal politics.

Linguistically however, in identifying the *oolooss* as a principle organizing societal unit, Elphinstone was adopting an ambiguity. Ethnicity and kinship in Afghanistan were expressed through a family of terms that crossed European conceptual boundaries. '*Wulus*' (or *oolooss*) could refer to 'nation', 'tribe', or 'relatives'; just as '*qawm*', can refer to 'people', 'tribe', or community;¹¹⁵ or '*tyfah*' can refer to 'clan', 'tribe', and 'group'.¹¹⁶

For Elphinstone, the tribal model provided a lens on Afghanistan's political community, and indeed its identity as a nation, but it created a false sense of conceptual coherence. As he declared: 'An assemblage of many commonwealths such as I have described composes the Afghaun nation, and the whole, or nearly the whole is formed into one state by the supreme

¹¹⁴ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1842), 213.

¹¹⁵ To further confuse matters, in northern India *qawm* (or *qaum*) was also used to signify 'caste'. Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 170.

¹¹⁶ Shahrani, 'Statebuilding and Social Fragmentation in Afghanistan', 24.

authority of a common sovereign.’¹¹⁷ Yet he warned that ‘The system of government which I have described is so often deranged by circumstances ... that it is seldom found in full force; and must, therefore, be considered rather as the model on which all the governments of the tribes are formed, than a correct description of any one of them.’¹¹⁸ As this suggests, not all tribes were comparable in their forms of governance, nor were they equal in terms of their access to royal privilege. Moreover, Elphinstone seemed to be aware of the tenuous grasp that his republican sensibilities had on the reality of the Afghan political community. This was regularly overlooked in the subsequent use of his work however.

Hopkins has described Elphinstone’s *Account* as having led to the ‘Pashtunization’ of the Afghan political community, an observation drawn from the fact that the account prioritizes the Pashtun ethnic group, despite the fact that the Afghan state incorporated other ethnicities.¹¹⁹ But we could develop this further by noting the ‘Durraniification’ of the Afghan political class. Elphinstone exhibited a clear preference for the Durrani federation which he described as ‘the greatest, bravest, and most civilized in the nation’. ‘Among the Dooraunees, the heads of clans also form the nobility, who enjoy the great offices of the court, the state, and the army; and they appear in the double character of patriarchal chiefs, and of wealthy and powerful noblemen, deriving command and influence from the King’s authority, and from their own riches and magnificence.’¹²⁰ The Durrani were therefore identified as the Royal clan, in particular, the Saddozai sub-tribe of the Popolzai tribe, from which the King was drawn.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 275-6.

¹¹⁸ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 259.

¹¹⁹ The Pashtuns have been Afghanistan’s dominant ethnic group since the mid eighteenth century and today comprise around 40 per cent of the population. They include the tribal confederacies of the Durrani (Abdalis); the Ghilzais (Khalji/Ghilji); the Gurghusht; the Karlani (Pathans); and the nomadic Kuchi and Maldor. Pashtuns adhere to the Pashtunwali tribal code. Other major ethnic groups within Afghanistan include the Tajiks; The Uzbeks and Turkmen; the Aimaqs; and the Hazaras. See Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan*. See Appendices 1 and 2 for a breakdown of the ethnic groups of Afghanistan, and for the tribal structure of the Pashtun ethnic group. On ‘Pashtunization’ see Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, 23.

¹²⁰ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 85-6.

¹²¹ For a summary of the main ethnic and tribal groups of Afghanistan see Appendices 1 and 2.

This status accorded a distinct form of 'government' within the tribe, 'occasioned by the more immediate connection of the Dooraunees with the King, and by the military tenure on which they hold their lands.'¹²² These land grants were known as *tiyuls*. The King was not only the hereditary chief of the Durrani tribe, but also considered their military commander, to a greater extent than was the case with the other tribes. 'With these [other tribes], the military service which they owe to the crown is an innovation, introduced after they had occupied their lands, which they had conquered or brought under cultivation without aid from any external power, and without an acknowledgement of dependence on any superior: but the lands of the Dooraunees were actually given to them on condition of military service, and the principal foundation of their right to the possession is a grant [or *tiyul*] of the king.'¹²³ Therefore, a dependency existed between the Durrani tribal leaders and the King, to a degree that did not exist with the other tribes. This royal privilege was manifested too in the titles bestowed upon these leaders. Whilst the non-Durrani leaders held the title *Khan* (Chieftain), the heads of the Durrani clans were given the military title of *sirdar* (General), by virtue of their rank in the King's army.¹²⁴

The sense of prestige that Elphinstone attached to the Durrani is clear when one compares their description with that of other tribes. The Ghilzais who inhabited the area between Ghazni and Kandahar, and had previously held power in Kandahar prior to the rise of Ahmad Shah Durrani,¹²⁵ were described by Elphinstone as far more anarchic in their form of government, and bitter at their fall from power. 'No Khaun of a tribe or *Mullik*¹²⁶ of a village ever interferes as a magistrate to settle a dispute or at least a serious one; they keep their own families and their immediate dependents in order, but leave the rest of the people to accommodate their differences as they

¹²² Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 100.

¹²³ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 100.

¹²⁴ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 102.

¹²⁵ Founder of the Durrani Empire in 1747. The capital of the Durrani Kingdom was formally Kandahar.

¹²⁶ A village-level leader.

can.’¹²⁷ Yet there were exceptions to this. Those Ghilzai tribes living near the cities of Ghazni and Kabul were subject to a greater degree of royal authority and therefore exhibited a higher degree of internal regulation.¹²⁸ However, amongst the eastern Ghilzais ‘the power of the chief is not considerable enough to form a tie to keep the clan together, and they are broken up into little societies (like the Eusofzyes), which are quite independent in all internal transactions.’¹²⁹

The Yusufzais (or ‘Eusofzyes’), who were based north of Peshawar, were described as amongst the most independent and antagonistic of all the tribes. For Elphinstone this stemmed from the fact that the authority of their chiefs was derived from common descent, rather than from competence, or even wealth. A Khan’s ability to mediate between disputants for example (a key role for local leaders) was based ‘more on his arguments than his authority, and more on the caprice of the disputants than on either.’¹³⁰ For the Yusufzai, independence of the crown was a matter of pride rather than circumstance, indeed a famous Yusufzai saint reportedly left them with the curse that ‘they should always be free, but that they should never be united’.¹³¹ This is despite the fact that the Yusufzai were by descent part of the Durrani federation. As suggested elsewhere, Elphinstone explained this by reference to their remote location away from the centres of royal authority.

The Achakzai provide a further example of a Durrani sub-tribe that did not exhibit the regal characteristics that Elphinstone suggests were common to the tribe as a whole. Based in the hills and on the plains to the south of Kandahar the Achakzai were, according to Elphinstone, far from noblemen: ‘No traveller can enter their country without being plundered, and they often make nightly expeditions into the lands of their neighbours to steal. Skill in theft, and boldness in robbery, are great qualities among them; and a great deal of the conversation of the young men turns on the exploits of this kind

¹²⁷ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 151.

¹²⁸ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 151.

¹²⁹ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 152.

¹³⁰ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 18-19.

¹³¹ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 19.

which they have performed or projected.’¹³² Despite their Khan enjoying more power than most the Achakzai were, according to Elphinstone, known for their unruliness: ‘Their manners are rough and barbarous ... They are not hospitable; they have no mosques; and seldom pray, or trouble themselves about religion ... All tribes are loud in their complaints against them, and the Dooraunees will hardly acknowledge them for clansmen.’¹³³

The tribal taxonomy that Elphinstone provides is one of the most significant aspects of his account, yet as his own work shows, the extent to which these tribes could be described as a coherent whole was debatable. The tribes varied greatly in their adherence to centralised rule. In those areas close to the cities and towns, a degree of royal authority, and therefore coherence was attainable. Yet outside of these areas the tribes were more akin to ‘republics’. Indeed, this is how Elphinstone described them. In these republican settings the community was the government. The *jirga*, as a consultative body, allowed for a degree of ‘democratic’ rule for Elphinstone. In such settings, when the *jirga* could not decide, disputes were settled by recourse to Shariah law and the *mullahs*.¹³⁴ As such, the description of Afghan society varied depending on where one looked, and how coherent one imagined a society to be. In beginning with an assumption of an Afghan ‘nation’, Elphinstone’s account becomes less convincing as the exact constitution of that nation is discovered. In addition, this nation encompassed more than the Durrani federation, and more than the Pashtun ethnic group. The Tajiks and the Hazaras were not the only groups to be sidelined in this implied hierarchy, but the account did appear to relegate their status as members of the governing elite. The legacies of this interpretation are still with us today.

¹³² Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 128.

¹³³ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 128-9.

¹³⁴ Religious leaders.

Despite the salience of the tribal structure in understanding Afghan society, government authority provided an additional lens with which to view the Afghan polity. As Elphinstone's embassy passed across the deserts of the Punjab and through the territories lining the Indus, and as he headed towards Peshawar, the writ of the government became ever-more apparent. At Mojgarh¹³⁵ the envoy met a delegation of Bahawul Khan, a chief of one of Kabul's eastern provinces. The Khan 'praised the King of Caubul highly; but said he had never seen him.'¹³⁶ At Moultan, just before the reaching the Indus, the envoy received a *Mehmandaur* (official courier) of the King. North of Moultan at Layah, on the Indus, two Durrani horsemen met the envoy, 'sent by the governor of the province to accompany me to his limits'. Elphinstone also recorded a visit by a Persian attendant of the King, admitting he was 'a good deal surprised at the freedom with which all my visitors spoke of the government; and of the civil wars.'¹³⁷ Having crossed the Indus further north, Elphinstone was rewarded for a month's wait at Dera Ismail Khan with a dress of honour from the King, but it wasn't until the envoy reached the plain of Kalabagh, south of Kohat, that they met with Durrani nobleman sent to conduct the embassy to court at Peshawar.

It was at Peshawar that the nature of the Afghan constitution was first made clear. The monarchy was based on a hereditary crown within the Saddozai sub-tribe, although there was no apparent rule for its descent to the eldest son. Within the court there was also the position of the '*Vizeer Auzim*' (Grand Vizier) who, to varying degrees, shared the authority of the King. Indeed the position of *Vizier* has often been overlooked in Afghanistan's political history. Its importance derived not just from the powers enjoyed by the *Vizier*, but the fact that it was often a political appointment of the King, designed to

¹³⁵ Mojgarh today sits just north of India's border with Pakistan. A fort is the main remnant of its architecture.

¹³⁶ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 29.

¹³⁷ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 44.

placate key constituencies.¹³⁸ The King had the right to coinage, the right to make war and peace, and the power to make 'treaties of his own authority'.¹³⁹ He also held power of all appointment although this was severely circumscribed: 'in many cases his choice is confined to particular families; of this description are the chiefships of tribes. Some offices of the state, and many even of the King's household are hereditary.'¹⁴⁰ He also had control of the revenue, control of military levies and command of the army, as well as part of the administration of justice, '[i]n cases where the crime is against the state.'¹⁴¹

The Kingdom was divided into twenty-seven provinces or districts, the eighteen most important of which were governed by a *Haukim* and a *sirdar*.¹⁴² The *Haukim* was responsible for command of the irregular troops and for collection of the revenue, and the *sirdar* commanded the regular troops, provided for the 'public tranquility', and enforced the authority of the *Haukim*. Where the *Haukim* was a Durrani, he also filled the role of *sirdar*.¹⁴³ The remaining nine provinces were also assigned a Durrani *sirdar* but he resided at Kabul and only visited his province in cases of revenue collection.

The main source of revenue was from land taxes and the principal expenses of the court were payment of the army, the household, the court establishment, and the clergy.¹⁴⁴ Interestingly, tax payments seemed to fall disproportionately on non-Afghans. Elphinstone referred to the so-called

¹³⁸ Other key positions included the 'Moonsee Baushee' (chief secretary); the 'Hircarra Baushee' (head of intelligence department); the 'Nushukchee Baushee' (superintendent); and the 'Zubt Begee' (responsible for property seizures). Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 252.

¹³⁹ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 245. Although Elphinstone did point out that 'it seems to be understood that [the King] cannot cede any part of the territory occupied by Afghaun tribes.' The only apparent exception to this was the territory of Shawl which was passed to the Prince of Balochistan by Ahmad Shah.

¹⁴⁰ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 245.

¹⁴¹ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 245-6.

¹⁴² These provinces were Herat, Farrah, Kandahar, Ghazni, Kabul, Bamiyan, Ghorband, Jalalabad, Laghman, Peshawar, Dera Ismail Khan, Dera Ghazi Kahn, Shirkarpur, Sibi, Sindh, Kashmir, Attock, Chuch Hazara, Leia, and Multan. Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 256.

¹⁴³ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 255.

¹⁴⁴ In addition to these expenses Elphinstone notes, '[t]he pay of the great civil officers is small. They are in a great measure maintained by bribes and perquisites [*sic*], which, although they have the most pernicious effect on the resources of the state, do not diminish the revenue actually brought to account.' Elphinstone *Account*, II (1842), 269.

'infidel tax' which would fall on non-Muslims (Sikhs and Hindus), as well as a general tax on '*humsauyehs*', those who had attached themselves to a clan from which they were not descended.¹⁴⁵ The army was drawn mainly from the Durrani *sirdars* who were obliged to provide troops in return for their *tiyuls*. In this sense, as Elphinstone summarized, '[t]he King's object with the Afghaun tribes is, to get men from the western, and money from the eastern.'¹⁴⁶ Each clan formed a separate corps. For most Durrani, war was the only time that they would attend the King.¹⁴⁷ Other formations alongside the Durrani clans included the *Gholami Shahs*, established by Ahmad Shah and drawn from foreigners residing within the Kingdom. About one third of this corps was made up of the *Qizilbash*, a Turkic fighting unit who provided for the protection of the King in Kabul. Perhaps more importantly for the British however was the '*Ooloossee*', a 'general rising of the people' for use in foreign invasions. As Elphinstone explained, '[o]nly those of the tribes nearest the scene of action could be expected to rise; they would be under no regulation on the King's part, and no good could be expected, in regular actions, from so ungovernable a multitude; but if properly applied, this kind of force would not be without its advantages. ... Ooloossee troops get no pay.'¹⁴⁸

Law was in the form of the Shariah, which was adopted in civil actions, but the *Pashtunwali* was considered more important in the internal administration of tribal justice. This was described as 'a rude system of customary law, founded on principles such as one would suppose to have prevailed before the institution of civil government.'¹⁴⁹

At the time of Elphinstone's trip the court consisted of two parties. The first headed by Akram Khan, a Durrani 'lord' and also 'Prime Minister'; the second made up of Persian ministers and headed by Mir Abul Hassan Khan 'who being about the King's person, and entirely dependent on his favour,

¹⁴⁵ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 264.

¹⁴⁶ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 247.

¹⁴⁷ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 266.

¹⁴⁸ Elphinstone, *Account*, II (1842), 272.

¹⁴⁹ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 264-5.

possessed a secret influence, which they often employed in opposition to Akram Khan.¹⁵⁰ Indeed the two parties appeared to be in competition with each other, with the Persians telling Elphinstone that the king was 'jealous' of Akram Khan and the 'great' Durrani.¹⁵¹

Aside from the jealousies of the court, Elphinstone also learned of the regional players' attitudes to the British embassy's trip to Kabul. The Marattas of India had already sent an embassy to solicit the king's assistance against the British. Ranjit Singh, ruler of the bordering Sikh Kingdom had also warned the Shah of the 'dangerous nature' of British designs. In addition, the *Haukims* of Laya, Multan, and Sindh 'did all they could to thwart [the mission's] success'.¹⁵² Even the Durrani lords were averse to an alliance that could diminish the influence of the aristocracy over the King.

In assessing the authority of the King over the country as a whole, Elphinstone faced the challenge of getting beyond the outward expression of this authority. He had already ascertained that the king's authority extended to 'a general superintendence over the whole kingdom, and to the levying [of] fixed proportions of troops or money, or both, from each tribe, for the common defence.' But as has already been discussed, he also found that, '[t]he whole nation ... is seldom animated by one spirit, and the individual interests of each Oolooss attract more of its attention than the general welfare.'¹⁵³ Rather than seeing this as a source of weakness however, positives were drawn from this state of affairs: 'In Afghaunistaun ... the internal government of the tribes answers its end so well, that the utmost disorders of the royal government never derange its operations, nor disturb the lives of the people.'¹⁵⁴ This 'high-spirited' republicanism ensured defence against 'tyrants' and paradoxically guarded against a collective descent into ruin across the entire country.

¹⁵⁰ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 70.

¹⁵¹ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 71.

¹⁵² Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 69.

¹⁵³ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 276.

¹⁵⁴ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 280.

It is impossible to avoid the impression that Elphinstone developed a certain admiration for a system that, despite twelve years of 'civil warfare'¹⁵⁵ as he put it, had allowed for 'progressive improvement' in the welfare of the country. '[W]e cannot but be struck with the vast superiority of the materials [the Afghans] afford for the construction of a national constitution ... if a King of sufficient genius to form the design of cordially uniting his subjects, should spring up among the Afghans, he would necessarily fall on a beautiful form of government, as the only one by which he could possibly accomplish his design.'¹⁵⁶ Continuing this argument, he pointed out that 'An ordinary monarch might endeavour to reduce the tribes to obedience by force; but one Afghaun King¹⁵⁷ has already had the penetration to discover that it would require less exertion to conquer all the neighbouring kingdoms, than to subdue his own countrymen.'¹⁵⁸

As such, whilst the relationship between the king and the Afghan tribes was a key dynamic in understanding the nature of royal authority; the nature of that rule over the rest of the Kingdom was of equal importance, not least for the British whose own territorial influence was expanding in the direction of the Kingdom of Kabul. The conquering of neighbouring kingdoms had allowed Afghan kings to develop a revenue stream independent of the Afghan tribes. By taxing foreign territories the King could relieve the burden on the domestic population and therefore promote perceptions of Royal legitimacy within the Afghan nation. This meant that those areas in outside of the Afghan nation were 'entirely under the authority of the King'.¹⁵⁹ Those areas of the Kingdom of Kabul that were either of no threat to the King's domestic authority, or lacked the capacity to defend themselves, or indeed a combination of the two, were therefore considered to be most subject to the King's sovereign yoke.

¹⁵⁵ It seems that Elphinstone was here referring to the civil war-like struggles that were often rumbling between more 'republican' tribes. He may also have been referencing the long-running dynastic struggle, a part of which he witnessed at Peshawar.

¹⁵⁶ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 280-1.

¹⁵⁷ Elphinstone here cites Ahmad Shah Durrani, the founder of the Durrani Empire in 1747.

¹⁵⁸ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 281.

¹⁵⁹ Elphinstone, *Account*, I (1819), 276.

CONCLUSION

Elphinstone's account gives the distinct impression that he was seeking a cognitive framework that would order Afghanistan in familiar terms. This was a process of casting around for epistemic criteria, which led to certain emergent properties, perhaps most significantly was this illusion of order. This illusion was more a creation of the comparisons Elphinstone drew in his own mind, although he repeatedly pointed out the nuance in this reading. The search for a regular order rigidified the social structure in a way that did not capture the egalitarianism and fluidity that inhered within the Afghan system of rule. These qualities derived in part from the tensions between centre and periphery that were present in, for example, the Durrani system of land tenure in return for royal privilege. But what complicated the picture was the process of political change that the Afghan state was undergoing at the time. As more recent histories of Afghanistan's political development have pointed out, the very logic of Afghan rule was changing in the early nineteenth century.¹⁶⁰ As the area from which revenue could be drawn was shrinking, the King's own financial position became more precarious, not least because his ability to disburse royal favour through the non-collection of taxes was decreasing. In response, Shah Shuja, and his predecessors were seeking to reform their own concept of royal legitimacy, whilst fighting off challengers who were seeking to undermine their increasingly vulnerable rule. Seeking to move beyond a system that bound royal authority to the tumults of tribal politics, Afghan rulers sought to legitimize their position on the grounds of Islam, and royalism. But they could not escape the system that was already in place. The 'civil war'-like features that were witnessed by Elphinstone's envoy were the spasms of a transitioning Afghan state, but lacking a context to put these changes in, their significance was missed at the time. It would take later knowledge entrepreneurs to provide a perspective on these processes, but these adventurers would remain hidebound by the structures that Elphinstone had already erected.

¹⁶⁰ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*; Barfield, *Afghanistan*; Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth Century Afghanistan*.

Alexander Burnes

Burnes was just 26 in 1831 when, as an Army Captain, he was tasked with surveying the navigability of the lower Indus River. The survey was carried out with a view to its exploitation as a transit route from Karachi to Lahore, then onwards through Afghanistan to the markets of Turkistan and Central Asia. His cargo on this trip was five horses that were to be given as a gift to the ruler of the Sikh Kingdom Ranjit Singh; a deal sweetener in the British request to use his territory as a future transit route. Having completed the mission successfully and returned to Simla, he proposed a further journey to his superiors, one that would take him to the underexplored northern routes to India, through Kabul, across the Hindu Kush to the Oxus River and beyond to Bokhara.

Burnes was deeply involved in British policy prior to and during the First Anglo-Afghan war, eventually becoming the deputy British envoy at Kabul. His dedication to the cause would eventually prove fatal as he was killed by rioting Kabulis during the Kabul uprising of 1841. In his later diplomatic role Burnes would negotiate the status of Peshawar with Dost Muhammad Khan, the ruler of the Kingdom of Kabul since 1826, and someone with whom the British had had little engagement with prior to the First Anglo-Afghan War. Burnes' meeting with him would be the first, and most significant of any British representative. Moreover, his political intelligence would provide for the British an important insight into the tumults that the Afghan polity was experiencing at this time.¹⁶¹ In this sense, Burnes' account provides an important update to the British framing of the Afghanistan question at a time in which regional politics were becoming of increasing concern to them.

¹⁶¹ IOR/V/27/270/7, 'Reports and Papers, Political, Geographical, and Commercial. Submitted to Government, by Sir Alexander Burnes; Lieutenant Leech; Doctor Lord; and Lieutenant Wood'.

A major contribution of Burnes' work comes in Book II of the third volume where he updates the reader on the period between 1809 and 1831. The Afghan state had at this time undergone seismic changes. After Elphinstone's mission made its way back across the Indus having been warned off by Shah Shuja, the unfortunate King of Kabul lost his crown at the battle of Nimla, three miles west of Gandamak. The fall of Shah Shuja was far from unexpected. His power had been on the wane since the fall of his *Vizier* and the murder of his 'comrade' the Mir Waiz. In the key struggle for power as recorded by British accounts, Shuja had failed to conciliate the Kandahar-based Barakzai chief Fitih Khan, who backed Shuja's Saddozai rival, Mahmud Khan, to the throne. In the wake of his defeat at Nimla, Shah Shuja fled to the Khyber Pass. He would resurface four months later in a failed attempt to take Kandahar.¹⁶²

Having ascended to the throne, the new government of Mahmud Khan set its sights on reclaiming Kashmir from the son of Shuja's *Vizier*, Ata Muhammad Khan. In what would soon be an unthinkable alliance, Mahmud sought military support for this venture, from the Sikh Kingdom of Ranjit Singh. In return for troops and safe passage across his territory, the Sikh ruler would receive a share of the Kashmir revenue amounting to nine *lakhs* of rupees.¹⁶³ In 1811 Mahmud's army, led by Fitih Khan, retook Kashmir with such speed that it did not require the support of the Sikhs who arrived two days after the Durrani army's victory. The terms of the alliance were swiftly rejected by the new governor of Kashmir, the brother of Muhammad's *Vizier*, Muhammad Azim Khan. The Sikhs left 'in disgust'.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Three more failed attempts followed this. The first attempt via Kashmir in 1815, an aborted attempt in 1818, and then again 1834 which is covered in more detail in chapter three. The latter two had been followed from a distance by British officials and in the case of the 1834 expedition, supported by British financing. Dalrymple, *Return of a King*, 36-8, 45-6, 66-73.

¹⁶³ Equivalent to 900,000. A *lakh* is a South Asian numerical unit that equates to 100,000.

¹⁶⁴ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 238.

In the search for retribution, Ranjit Singh formed an agreement with the then Commander of the Fort at Attock, and the brother of the recently deposed governor of Kashmir. Hearing news of this, Fiti Khan swiftly marched back to Attock and faced the Sikh army in battle at Chuch, south of Attock. It was in this battle that the brother of Fiti Khan, a young Dost Muhammad Khan led 2000 Afghans against the Sikh artillery. In the midst of the battle a false message was deliberately conveyed to both Dost Muhammad Khan and Fiti Khan leaving the impression on each that the other had failed. This prompted an Afghan retreat in error. The mistake would signal a collapse in the King of Kabul's authority East of the Indus. Facing a further uprising in Herat, Fiti Khan would be forced to move his troops to Afghanistan's western border. The vacuum of authority that this opened up in Kashmir soon led to the fall of that lucrative territory to the Sikhs as well.

Through all of this, factions were beginning to emerge within Mahmud Khan's court. The King was content to rely on his *Vizier* Fiti Khan who now 'managed the whole affairs of the Kingdom'¹⁶⁵, however his son was not content with the arrangement. In 1818 matters came to a head. Unable to stem his jealousies any longer, the crown Prince Kamran put Fiti Khan to death in gruesome fashion. This act drove Fiti Khan's brothers into open rebellion. The King, fearing for his rule fled to Herat, and was succeeded in Kabul by his son Kamran.

Meanwhile the governor of Kashmir and the eldest surviving member of Fiti Khan's family, Azim Khan joined the rebellion against his murderer in Kabul. Seeking a replacement, Azim Khan then took what Burnes described as the 'extraordinary step' of recalling Shah Shuja from prolonged exile with a view to installing him on the throne at Kabul.¹⁶⁶ Within touching distance of reclaiming his former title, Shuja returned to Peshawar where his arrogance got the better of him. Insulting a representative of Azim Khan he managed to turn the Barakzai family against him. Azim Khan turned instead to another Saddozai ruler, Ayub Khan, who submitted himself to Azim Khan's authority

¹⁶⁵ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 240.

¹⁶⁶ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 243.

and took up his position as a 'puppet monarch'.¹⁶⁷ Shuja fled once more to Shikarpur in Sindh before retiring in Ludhiana supported this time with a British pension.

For Burnes, this period signalled the collapse of the Afghan system of government. In 1823, at the Battle of Nowshera, halfway between Attock and Peshawar, the Sikhs defeated the Durrani army of *Ghazis* (holy warriors), marking the growing role for Islam as a motivating call to arms. The Sikhs went on to sack Peshawar, and so Burnes relates, '[a]s the battle with Futteh Khan on the plains of Chuch decided the supremacy of the Seiks eastward of the Indus, this campaign established their power between that river and Peshawar. That city has since paid an annual tribute to Runjeet Sing.'¹⁶⁸ On the death of Muhammad Azim Khan, his riches passed to his son Habibullah Khan. However, Azim's death also triggered internal family strife that would lead to Habibullah's uncles conspiring against him. Mirroring Barnett Rubin's observation over 150 years later in relation to the Afghan civil war of the 1990s,¹⁶⁹ this was the original fragmentation of Afghanistan of this period. In the wave of succession crises that followed, Dost Muhammad Khan would eventually take Kabul in 1826, ushering in a period of rule that would last till the British intervention in 1839, but leaving the dynastic struggle unresolved.

CHANGE IN CONTEXT: THE IMPLICATIONS FOR RULE

Alexander Burnes' experience of Afghanistan came then, at a time in which political power across the kingdom was apparently in a process of flux. This had a clear impact on his attempts to describe 'Afghan character':

The Afghans are a nation of children; in their quarrels they fight, and become friends without any ceremony. They cannot conceal their feelings from one another, and a person with any discrimination may at all times pierce their designs. If they themselves are to be believed,

¹⁶⁷ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 246.

¹⁶⁸ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 248.

¹⁶⁹ Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2002).

their ruling vice is envy, which besets even the nearest and dearest relations. No people are more incapable of managing an intrigue. I was particularly struck with their idleness; they seem to sit listlessly for the whole day, staring at each other; how they live it would be difficult to discover, yet they dress well, and are healthy and happy.'

In a further example of the contradictions that often defined British attempts to describe 'Afghan character', Burnes concluded this passage with the line, 'I imbibed a very favourable impression of their national character.'¹⁷⁰ This favourable impression perhaps sprung from their system of rule. Borrowing from Elphinstone, Burnes quickly came to identify with the 'liberality' and egalitarianism inherent in the Afghan way of life: 'There is a simplicity and freedom about these people greatly to be admired', he wrote, 'and, whatever the rule may be, I can vouch for petitioners having an ear, at least, given to their complaints. Every one seems on an equality with the chief, and the meanest servant addresses him without ceremony.'¹⁷¹

In terms of the geography of the country, Burnes offered little by way of opinion, but on the question of political geography he took a narrower view than Elphinstone. For Burnes, passing into Hazara territory after Bamiyan was equivalent to leaving the Kingdom of Kabul behind. This is despite the fact that the chief of Saighan, north of Bamiyan was still at least half subject to Kabul rule. Physical appearance also mattered for Burnes, speaking of the Hazaras he noted they 'are a simple-hearted people, and differ much from the Afghan tribes. In physiognomy, they more resemble Chinese'.¹⁷² This territorial boundary, appeared to be a cognitive boundary for Burnes as well. Their loose adherence to Islamic custom, including the drinking of alcohol, and their disturbing propensity towards mass population displacement as a method of control and even income, repelled Burnes. By the time he had reached the Uzbek ruler of Kunduz, Muhammad Moorad Beg, his opinions were clear; of the Uzbeks he declared 'no people are more simple'.¹⁷³ Despite Elphinstone's wider concept of the Kingdom of Kabul's territory, Burnes

¹⁷⁰ Burnes, *Travels*, I, 144.

¹⁷¹ Burnes, *Travels*, I, 93.

¹⁷² Burnes, *Travels*, I, 178.

¹⁷³ Burnes, *Travels*, I, 227.

clearly saw this in more limited terms, a feature perhaps of the context of shrinking authority he found himself in. But it is worth pointing out that although Elphinstone may have laid the foundations for the 'Pashtunization' of Afghanistan's political community, it was individuals such as Burnes who developed it.

Burnes' account gives us some insights into competing comprehensions of Afghanistan's political space, but perhaps the more salient lesson springing from the work in terms of British understandings of Afghan political geography is the emphasis on the faultlines emerging from within Afghanistan's political community. Behind the dynastic struggles for power in the period leading up to Dost Muhammad Khan's seizure of the throne in 1826 lay a complex inter-clan rivalry, only partially accessible to Burnes' elite-focussed information network. Although Dost Muhammad Khan was the first Barakzai leader to ascend to the throne since the formation of the Durrani kingdom, the Barakzai had often been the power behind the throne, acting as 'kingmakers'¹⁷⁴ for a succession of Saddozai rulers, ending in the 'puppet monarch' of Ayub Khan who was backed by his powerful *vizier*, Azim Khan, a Barakzai.

Whilst the Barakzai uprising was attributed primarily to the murder of Fitih Khan by his Saddozai dependent, Mahmud Shah, this was the culmination of a longer saga of Saddozai ill-treatment of their Barakzai brethren in the context of a weakening Saddozai dynasty. Dost Muhammad Khan was therefore taking advantage of a shift in the dynastic power balance brought about by the injustices and failures of his Saddozai predecessors.

There were two implications of this shift. Firstly, the Saddozai family were seen as effectively ruled out of power by a fall in their perceived legitimacy, and in practice by the ascendant Barakzai clan. Burnes certainly gained this impression at Kabul. Drawing once more on the republican ideas of Elphinstone he argued:

¹⁷⁴ Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War*, 45.

‘All the institutions of the Afghans are favourable to a republic; and the supremacy of the Barukzye family in Cabool is acceptable to the people and I even think favourable to the prosperity of the country. It is by far the greatest clan of the Dooraunees, amounting to about 60,000 families, which will enable it to maintain its authority. The late royal family of the Sudozyes, on the other hand, were few in number and looked for support to other tribes. ... The hatred of [the Saddozai] family to the house of Cabool ... forbid the belief that the Barukzyes will ever consent to their restoration. It is certain that the aid of no other tribe can avail them, for the whole wealth of the country is in the hands of their enemies; and the bulk of the people view their misfortunes with indifference ... It is evident therefore, that the restoration of either Shooja ool Moolk, or Kamran, is an event of the most improbable nature. The dynasty of the Sudozyes has passed away, unless it be propped up by foreign aid’.¹⁷⁵

The second implication of this was an apparent emerging inter-Barakzai feud as they consolidated their newly prominent position on the back of the collapsed Saddozai regime. This manifested itself in the form of a three way split between Kabul, Peshawar and Kandahar. Dost Muhammad’s half brothers in Peshawar and Kandahar now viewed the Kabul regime covetously. At the time of Burnes’ trip Sultan Muhammad Khan at Peshawar was known to be scheming with Shere Dil Khan of Kandahar to mount a concerted attack on Kabul, although Burnes projected that it was more likely that they would be overrun by Dost Muhammad first.¹⁷⁶ In this eventuality he predicted that the Sikhs could be turned to by Sultan Muhammad, and he had already courted Burnes assiduously on his way through Peshawar, flattering the British official with a view to improving relations and possibly forming an alliance.¹⁷⁷ Herat meanwhile appeared to be drifting towards Persian suzerainty under the deposed Saddozai Durrani.

In short therefore, Dost Muhammad Khan’s authority was severely circumscribed. To the east his effectual rule reached only to the gardens of Nimla, three miles west of Gandamak, and to the west it terminated at the territory of the Hazaras. To the routes of the north it barely reached Bamiyan,

¹⁷⁵ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 271-2.

¹⁷⁶ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 257.

¹⁷⁷ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 255. Burnes, *Travels*, I, 87-97.

whilst to the south it extended as far as Ghazni.¹⁷⁸ As Burnes summarized: 'Dost Mohammed Khan cannot rise above the rank of chief, or be aught than one among many in Afghanistan. In the present state of politics, he is, nevertheless, the most rising man in the Cabool dominions.'¹⁷⁹ In this context, military power was paramount, and Burnes frequently detailed the troop numbers of the various chiefs he met along the way.

Faced with a depleted revenue stream from the tribute of Kashmir and Sindh, which in many ways the Durrani Kingdom could not exist without, the basis of legitimate rule was exhibiting a change. Dost Muhammad Khan was demonstrating a shift towards a style of rule that would rely less on the Durrani nobility and more on a general perception of legitimacy. He had banned alcohol in Kabul, in accordance with Islamic practice, despite his own enjoyment of wine. He also took a more comprehensive role in governance within his sphere of authority and Burnes praised his efforts: 'The justice of this chief', he said, 'affords a constant theme of praise to all classes: the peasant rejoices at the absence of tyranny; the citizen, at the safety of his home, and the strict municipal regulations regarding weights and measures; the merchant, at the equity of the decisions and the protection of his property; and the soldiers, at the regular manner in which their arrears are discharged. A man in power can have no higher praise.'¹⁸⁰

This style of leadership was at odds with that at Kandahar where, as Burnes recorded, '[t]he government is not popular, nor would it appear, from the acts of oppression that it deserved to be so.'¹⁸¹ Meanwhile Kamran, at Herat was seen as living on borrowed time, ruling 'more from tolerance in his enemies than his own power. ... [Kamran] has the character of a cruel and tyrannical man, is destitute of friends, and odious to his countrymen.'¹⁸² Herat, Burnes said, was in effect, a dependency of Persia.

¹⁷⁸ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 261.

¹⁷⁹ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 265.

¹⁸⁰ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 263.

¹⁸¹ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 268.

¹⁸² Burnes, *Travels*, III, 269.

One area in which Dost Muhammad had placed an emphasis was in the promotion of trade. It seems likely that this was driven by financial imperatives, but Burnes reported it as a result of the greater security of trade routes and a less onerous transit tax than other routes. Customs receipts in Kabul were up 50,000 rupees, with the King profiting from two *lakhs*¹⁸³ of rupees in revenue per annum.¹⁸⁴ Burnes was impressed with trade opportunities in the region, and took a particular interest in the silk making its way from Kabul and Balkh, as well as the coal mines in Kohat.¹⁸⁵ The fracturing of authority in the region had subdivided the wealth of the country, and perversely created a greater number of market opportunities for traders. Demand for British and Indian goods was therefore on the rise. In addition, the higher transit taxes in Ranjit Singh's Sikh Kingdom had altered the merchant routes in the region. Rather than reaching the northern Punjab via Attock from the east, the more circuitous route through Kabul was preferred. Accordingly, merchants wishing to reach markets in Peshawar and elsewhere in the northern Punjab, crossed into Afghanistan via passes to the south of the Khyber, travelling via Ghazni and Kabul, and reaching Peshawar from the west, therefore pushing up customs receipts in Kabul.¹⁸⁶ These changes indicated opportunities for trade that Burnes was keen to exploit.

CONCLUSION

Burnes' account serves to update Elphinstone's 1809 work, which was in many ways out of date before it was even written, and certainly before it was first published in 1815. The significant point is that despite the seismic changes that the Afghan state had undergone in the twenty-year interregnum, Burnes was reluctant to move beyond Elphinstone's conceptual model. Burnes remained wedded to viewing Afghanistan's political development through the lens of royal authority, however circumscribed that authority now was, and however indifferent – if not violently opposed – to that rule the

¹⁸³ A *lakh* is a South Asian unit of measurement equivalent to 10,000.

¹⁸⁴ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 262.

¹⁸⁵ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 258-60.

¹⁸⁶ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 330-2.

rest of the country was. In effect, the Afghan polity as Elphinstone viewed it had ceased to exist as such, resembling rather a federation of variously allied fiefdoms. As such, there is a tension in Burnes' work between the slavish adherence to the 'Elphinstonian episteme' and the acknowledgement that much of what went before was now irrelevant in terms of understanding. Whereas Elphinstone provides the framework, therefore, Burnes provides the more contemporary context.

Given the impetus behind Burnes' mission his account clearly has a more policy-centred narrative. Whereas Elphinstone's account is wide-ranging in its scope, and more 'scientific' in its analysis, Burnes ventured a number of opinions that could easily be interpreted in policy terms. It is clear he preferred engagement with Dost Muhammad Khan whose governing style he saw as suited to the political conditions at the time, not least due the fact that he enjoyed a reputation for competence, and possessed a strong military. However, Burnes still left open the possibility of an alliance with Shah Shuja, with whom he met at Ludhiana as he prepared for his Kabul venture. Indeed, it was at this meeting that Shuja first proposed an alliance with the British saying '[h]ad I but my kingdom, how glad I should be to see an Englishman at Cabool.'¹⁸⁷ Burnes was apparently not impressed however: 'The fitness of Shooja ool Moolk for the station of sovereign', he said, 'seems ever to have been doubtful. His manners and address are highly polished; but his judgement does not rise above mediocrity. Had the case been otherwise, we should not now see him an exile from his country and his throne, without a hope of regaining them, after an absence of twenty years; and before he has attained the fiftieth year of his age.'¹⁸⁸

On regional strategy, Burnes offered his policy views too, being clear that he preferred an alliance with Kabul over an alliance with Persia. Indeed that the opportunity for this existed at all was in part down to the peaceful retreat of Elphinstone's earlier mission which according to Burnes 'left impressions most favourable to our disinterestedness.' As such, he recorded:

¹⁸⁷ Norris, *The First Afghan War*, 48.

¹⁸⁸ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 247.

‘[i]n Cabool ... it would not be difficult to form a connexion; and the chief is certainly worthy of notice, since his country lies on the great road by which the manufactures of Britain are imported, and which have of late been considerably increased ... It would require no great expenditure of the public funds to conciliate this chief, and it is to be remembered that he is in possession of the most important position in Asia, as regards the protection of British India. Had circumstances brought us into an alliance with Cabool, instead of Persia, we might have now possessed more trusty and useful allies, nearer home, than we can boast of in that country.’¹⁸⁹

The translation of colonial knowledge into policy advice therefore was already becoming apparent in Burnes early work, and this would become increasingly apparent in his later official dispatches as the next chapter will show.

Finally, and as the last quote suggests, Burnes remained attached to trade as a panacea to the Afghanistan problem. Partly as a result of his earlier mission on the Indus, but also as a reflection of the networks of movement he exploited in order to reach Afghanistan, Burnes was convinced that expanding the East India Company’s trade reach would allow greater political influence for the British, and would take the pressure off the King in Kabul who could use increased trade as a source of revenue. He saw the trade fairs in Bokhara to the north as diverting merchants away from Kabul despite the fact that this meant they had further to go. For Burnes, opening up a trade corridor from Kabul to Karachi and India was not only an opportunity waiting to be exploited, but one that would ‘counteract the intrigues and designs of the great power’, namely Russia.¹⁹⁰ But to finish on this point, the absence of Russia from this account is striking. The narrative of Russian threat is almost non-existent, at most a background consideration manifested in the form of a trade rivalry. What mattered more for Burnes was the fluidity in alliances that is emerging out of the weakened authority of the Dost and the resulting fragmented state of Afghanistan.

¹⁸⁹ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 273-4.

¹⁹⁰ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 336.

Masson presents a remarkable character and equally remarkable story. After five years of service in the Bengal Artillery from 1822, he deserted his post in 1827¹⁹¹ and with fellow soldier Richard Potter headed towards Central Asia. Desertions from the Indian services during this period were surprisingly common and the Bengal Army suffered a particularly high number after the siege of Bhurtpore in 1826, shortly before Masson and Potter absconded.¹⁹² The long period of service perhaps had a part to play in this. Recruits were technically enlisted for life although most were discharged after 21 years service, subject to satisfactory progress after 15 years.¹⁹³ Masson was therefore on the run from the authorities (his real name was James Lewis; Charles Masson was a pseudonym), yet his pursuit of adventure and knowledge was drawing him to a part of the world that was soon to become of interest to the political classes in Calcutta and London.

Not much is known of Masson's life before he joined the Bengal Army. In sustaining his cover, his published works are deliberately vague and occasionally deliberately misleading on certain details, including the dates of his initial journey and his background.¹⁹⁴ A recent discovery of an original copy of his 1842 memoirs revealed in an attached correspondence that he was educated in Walthamstow in London and worked as a clerk in a silk and insurance brokers before enlisting with the EIC following a dispute with his father.¹⁹⁵ It is likely he studied Latin, and appears to have had a good grasp of

¹⁹¹ In order to cover his tracks, Masson was apparently deliberately misleading on this point, claiming he arrived in the Punjab in 1826. The Bengal Muster Rolls give clarity on this point. Whitteridge, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan*, 13, 16.

¹⁹² In 1792 it was estimated that up to 1500 Europeans were serving with European state armies most of whom were deserters from the French or English armies. When the Indian partisan chief Yusuf Khan was captured by the British his army was found to have a sizable contingent of 200 European – largely British - deserters. Grey, C and H. L. O. Garrett, *European Adventurers of North India 1785-1849* (Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1993), 211-12.

¹⁹³ Grey and Garrett, *European Adventurers of North India*, 212.

¹⁹⁴ For example, Masson never mentions his travelling partner as far as Lahore, fellow deserter Richard Potter.

¹⁹⁵ Omrani, 'Charles Masson of Afghanistan', 201.

French.¹⁹⁶ He also exhibited a classicist background which appeared to draw him to the lands of Alexander the Great. Having journeyed across Rajasthan and reaching Bahawalpur, Masson took the now-familiar route up the Indus to Peshawar. He journeyed through Kabul, but instead of heading north as Burnes did, he headed south through the cities of Ghazni, (where he met Dost Muhammad Khan), and Kandahar, before striking off down to Quetta.

Masson's first excursion to the region ended in 1830, leaving via Hyderabad to spend time in the Gulf, as well as Bushire and Tabriz in Persia. During this excursion he cultivated a formidable network of British officials working across the region. He spent time with the British Residents at Bushire and Tabriz, and met the British envoy to Tehran, John McNeill, at the latter.¹⁹⁷ This coincided with a period of study and the distribution of findings from his first venture. These were forwarded to interested official parties, including the Governor of Bombay, and Henry Pottinger who had headed an embassy to Herat shortly before Elphinstone's embassy to Kabul. Pottinger was now at Hyderabad in charge of intelligence-gathering in the Indus states. In 1830 his assistant in this role was Alexander Burnes and it is clear that Burnes familiarized himself with Masson's early work.¹⁹⁸

Masson returned to Afghanistan, via Karachi and the Punjab, in 1831. On this second venture he overlapped with Burnes' first mission on the Indus, and upon his arrival received word of Burnes' difficulties in being granted access to the region.¹⁹⁹ Masson now enjoyed financial backing for his scholarly pursuits, derived from his new official contacts, and it is likely that these officials saw a future political benefit for his work. As a deserter, however, he

¹⁹⁶ Masson was occasionally mistaken for a Frenchman on his travels, indeed the French *Dictionnaire Biographique* mistakenly listed him as French for many years. Omrani, 'Charles Masson of Afghanistan', 201.

¹⁹⁷ Whitteridge, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan*, 56-9.

¹⁹⁸ Whitteridge, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan*, 56-7; MSS Eur E 161/6-7 [microfilm], 11a, Burnes to Masson, 9 March 1836. In this letter Burnes informed Masson that Pottinger had given him access to Masson's letters to him, and that Sir John Campbell, the Resident at Tabriz, had shown him his early papers. Masson's papers were also received at the highest levels in London through the British Resident at Bushire, David Wilson. Burnes was advised to view his work on the advice of the President of the EIC Board of Control, Charles Grant.

¹⁹⁹ Masson, *Narrative*, II, 7. Burdened by his official status Burnes had been refused entry by the Sindh Amirs.

was vulnerable, and by 1834 his past began to catch up with him. Captain Claude Wade, the British political officer at Ludhiana had taken an interest in his scholarly work. Acting on a tip-off from an American mercenary, Josiah Harlan, whom Masson had met on his original trip through the Punjab,²⁰⁰ Wade had also uncovered his true identity. Fortunately for Masson the quality of his contacts in Afghanistan made him an attractive information source for British officials and Wade arranged for him to be pardoned for his desertion in return for his agreement to work as a newswriter in Kabul.

Masson's status as a newswriter has often been misleadingly described in terms of his acting as a 'spy'. Whilst this is technically true, in the sense that he was gathering 'intelligence', the newswriter system was a little more above-board than this, more akin to a system of 'tolerated espionage'.²⁰¹ As an indigenous system of information gathering, the presence of newswriters in courts was 'more than simply having access to a flow of information. It implied that rulers had a legitimate interest in each others' policies and had established a degree of mutual trust'.²⁰² This was not necessarily a reciprocal agreement and thus the number of newswriters in a given court could also serve as an indication of relative sovereign authority – the more newswriters, the more sovereignty was effectively conceded.²⁰³ The British system was built on the back of this understanding, though it was increasingly staffed by non-native informants, who due to the engrained prejudice of the British were seen as more reliable – Masson was an example of this.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Josiah Harlan was an interesting character in his own right. He gave up his job as a surgeon to seek service with Ranjit Singh. He ran in to Masson in Ahmedpur by which time Harlan had gathered around him a small army, recruited along the way, perhaps attracted to Harlan's peculiar penchant for carrying aloft the stars and stripes wherever he roamed. Bijan Omrani, 'Charles Masson of Afghanistan: Deserter, Scholar, Spy', *Asian Affairs*, 39/2, (2008), 204.

²⁰¹ Bayly, *Information and Empire*, 70.

²⁰² Bayly, *Information and Empire*, 71.

²⁰³ Bayly, *Information and Empire*, 71.

²⁰⁴ Masson's predecessor in the role, the Indian Muslim Saiyad Keramat Ali – who had previously travelled with Conolly – was moved on from the position after suspicions were raised over his implication in local 'intrigue'. Whitteridge, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan*, 105-7.

Masson's travels in Afghanistan can be roughly broken down into three periods beginning with his first trip as a deserter; his second trip as an archaeologist; and a later third period as an archaeologist and newswriter. His three-volume account can be read as reflecting the nature of his research during these three periods, and as a product of the characters he engaged with during each. His initial forays were largely conducted on his own and he therefore operated very much with the support of local collaborators. As a result his initial accounts betray more of an 'on the ground' perspective. His tendency to attach himself to travelling religious figures, traders, and occasionally members of the governing classes makes for an eclectic account that includes local histories and oral testimonies, as well as the more familiar survey-based data on populations and military strength.²⁰⁵

Travelling slightly prior to Burnes' first trip, many of Masson's views chime with those of Burnes. He too admired the independence with which the 'poorer classes' were free to live their lives, 'little affected by the struggles for political ascendancy amongst the chiefs.'²⁰⁶ Yet, the divisions that had opened up amongst various political communities were also abundantly clear to him. As he passed through Kohat he became aware of the Peshawar *sirdars*' plans to topple the Dost in alliance with the Kandahar *sirdars*. The planned strategy was a pincer movement, with the Peshawar troops taking Jalalabad, whilst the Kandahar chiefs moved up through Ghazni and on to Kabul. In anticipation of this movement, the youngest of the Peshawar chiefs Pir Muhammad Khan was moving on Kohat as Masson was passing through. The gain of Kohat and nearby Hangu had expanded the authority of the Peshawar *sirdars* but Masson remained unimpressed with their standard of government. Praising the Afghan population of the Durrani, Mohmand sub-tribe who lived in the district, he submitted that they were 'deserving [of]

²⁰⁵ This form of data tends to come in the later accounts that record Masson's travels after his time spent with officials in Persia and the Gulf, suggesting that Masson had become more acquainted with official procedures.

²⁰⁶ Masson, *Narrative*, I, 282.

better rulers than they had.'²⁰⁷ For all of their pretensions to the throne however, the Peshawar *sirdars*, Masson noted, were inescapably under the yoke of their Sikh overlords. Peshawar was thus at this time rather like Herat: nominally an Afghan territory, but in effect under foreign rule.²⁰⁸ After passing through the Khyber, and reaching Jalalabad Masson was surprised to find that the chief there, Nawab Jabbar Khan, was also aligned against the Afghan ruler in Kabul, and apparently in league with the Peshawar *sirdars*.²⁰⁹

Masson's more local perspective also opened up insight into the variance within the Afghan political community. For example, he recorded in detail the political role of the Ghilzai population to the east and south of Kabul, noting that they were the most numerous of the Afghan tribes, and 'if united under a capable chief' they might 'become the most powerful'.²¹⁰ He also recorded much on the Hazara territories of Bisut to the west of Kabul, noting that Shi'a populations escaping sectarian tensions in Kabul had settled there and now presented a subversive influence over the rule of the Sunni dominated Barakzai.²¹¹

Much of Masson's work exposes a more local account of the fragmentation and breakdown of authority that Burnes noted. His account of Kalat²¹² for instance, provides a case study in the instabilities caused by the fall of the Durrani Empire, as well as the manner in which power was being negotiated through a system of fluid alliances, buttressed by occasional military ventures often resulting in negotiated treaty settlements. The regional divisions of power meant that Kalat - which was caught between the twin

²⁰⁷ Masson, *Narrative*, I, 132.

²⁰⁸ Burnes had noted this status too. As a Peshawar chief had quipped in response to a Persian remark on the independence of Persia from Russia, 'their independence was something like his own with the Seiks, unable to resist, and glad to compromise.' Burnes, *Travels*, I, 99.

²⁰⁹ Masson, *Narrative*, I, 173.

²¹⁰ Masson, *Narrative*, II, 204. For the Ghilzai more generally see Masson, *Narrative*, II, 204-10.

²¹¹ Although Dost Muhammad Khan's reputed Shi'a descent reportedly strengthened his capacity to bridge this sectarian divide. Masson, *Narrative*, II, 298.

²¹² Kalat is now well within modern day Pakistani territory, in Balochistan province, yet during the early nineteenth century, partly as a result of Afghan diaspora from the north, it was considered to be under the sway of Afghan rulers. See Masson, *Narrative*, II, 97-109.

threats of the Kandahar *sirdars* and the Sikh Kingdom - looked beyond its borders for support, at one point courting Herat, showing how instabilities and security dilemmas were driving rulers to unlikely alliances in the pursuit of self-preservation. The impression given is that 'intrigues', as the British put it, were internally and regionally driven, not externally encouraged.

Other communities such as the aforementioned Ghilzai were recorded as even further disassociated from the rulership in Kabul. As one Ghilzai ruler asked Masson, since 'his ancestors never acknowledged the authority of Ahmed Shah ... why should he respect that of traitors and Ahmed Shah's slaves?'²¹³ Meanwhile smaller peripheral groups such as those between Kunduz and Kabul in the north were recorded as essentially hedging between the competing political forces to the north and south of them.²¹⁴ This instability was apparently impacting on revenue collection and trade too as rulers of Kalat, Kandahar, and Kalat-i-Ghilzai imposed their own high tax burdens.²¹⁵

Masson got his chance to meet Dost Muhammad Khan at Ghazni, where, upon the battlefield, he met the Afghan King in a small tent. Despite the brevity of his meeting, Masson was much impressed with the form of rule he had established at Kabul, and in the general impression he gained of his popularity. Masson asserted that the Dost had brought calm to Kabul and was just in his dealings with the people: 'He is beloved by all classes of his subjects ... He administers justice with impartiality, and has proved that the lawless habits of the Afghan are to be controlled.'²¹⁶ The Dost was also admired for his skills as a military commander, yet one who 'only employs the sword when other means fail.'²¹⁷ His skills as a politician extended to the realm of religious expression too. As the son of a Shi'a mother he was nonetheless able to publically claim his adherence to the Sunna whilst 'possibly allowing the Shi'a part of the community to indulge in a belief

²¹³ Masson, *Narrative*, II, 210.

²¹⁴ Masson, *Narrative*, II, 306.

²¹⁵ See respectively Masson, *Narrative*, II, 166-9, 187, 199.

²¹⁶ Masson, *Narrative*, I, 252.

²¹⁷ Masson, *Narrative*, I, 252.

flattering to them.’²¹⁸ On the subject of the King, Masson’s account is reflective of Burnes’ sentiments. It seemed impossible for these men to resist the talents of Dost Muhammad Khan as a ruler. As with Burnes too, the manner of his government offers further hints at a shifting basis of legitimacy within Afghanistan at this time.

The status of Kandahar offers a telling contrast to the governing of Kabul in Masson’s account. The eldest brother and chief, Fur Dil Khan seemed wedded to a more tyrannical style of rule guilty of ‘extravagant opposition’ and pushing taxes ‘as far as possible’.²¹⁹ The people, Masson relates, ‘heartily execrate him, and pronounce him to be “*bissiar sakht*,” or very hard.’²²⁰ The province was being run, in effect, as an independent state at this time, with Fur Dil Khan taking on the Persian honourific, *Padshah* meaning ‘King’, in his dealings with other states.²²¹

Masson’s second volume, which encompasses the period of his second trip in the early 1830s, is more informative on the competition that described Afghanistan’s political community at this time. For example, his time spent surveying the areas around Bamiyan, including the famous Buddhist statues, brought him into close contact with the governor of the Bisut territories between Kabul and Bamiyan, Haji Khan, a collaborator with, and sometime competitor of Dost Muhammad Khan.²²² This particular excursion highlighted the manner in which governors such as Haji Khan were semi-autonomous rulers with their own local political coalitions, who would advise the ruler in Kabul on his best ruling alliances. In this case, Haji Khan attempted to encourage the Dost to cut his ties with his brothers at Kandahar.

²¹⁸ Masson, *Narrative*, I, 254.

²¹⁹ Masson, *Narrative*, I, 284. As with the Burnes account, Masson also notes that revenue collection seemed to fall hardest on the Hindu population. On his journey through Kohat he remarked on how the Hindu settlers were fleeing the oncoming army, fearful that they would be taxed for the second time that year as a new authority passed through. At Kandahar he witnesses the rounding up of ‘fifty to one hundred’ Hindus ‘some of them, no doubt, men of respectability, and all merchants or traders, who had been seized in their houses or shops and dragged along the streets to the *darbar* [court], the sirdars needing money and calling upon them to furnish it.’ Masson, *Narrative*, I, 110, 287.

²²⁰ Masson, *Narrative*, I, 284.

²²¹ Masson, *Narrative*, I, 283.

²²² See Masson, *Narrative*, II, 305-45, 360-1, 371-5,

CONCLUSION: MASSON THE OUTSIDER?

Following his recruitment as a newswriter in 1834 till he left the country in 1838, Masson would produce numerous reports on the situation in Afghanistan from Kabul. His published narrative did not emerge until after the Anglo-Afghan war in 1842, yet Masson drew upon his official reporting in order to complete this work. In this account however he wasted no time in excoriating those responsible for the manner in which the British went to war in 1838. Explaining the genesis of his work he described its use in the government offices of India and England as much to his regret, 'under the apprehension that they may have been made to subserve the interested schemes of artful and designing men – a purpose for which most certainly they were never written.'²²³ Turning his sights on Alexander Burnes, he accused him of 'wild projects', that he claimed he was 'mainly instrumental in forcing the government to attempt'.²²⁴ He also accused Burnes of withholding important information on an opportunity to reconcile with Kabul over the arrival of a Russian envoy, forcing Masson to support a termination of relations of the grounds of Afghan intransigence. But it was the militarisation of the policy that Masson had the biggest problem with. The Afghans, he believed, would have accepted Shah Shuja as their ruler without the need for overwhelming military force, in part because despite Dost Muhammad's ruling competence, he had failed to unite the Afghan population under his new form of regal authority. As he put it, '[t]he Afghans had no objections to the match, they disliked the manner of wooing.'²²⁵ Despite his warnings to this effect in the briefing notes he was sending at the time, Masson claimed these went unheeded because, 'there was no illusion to the designs of Russia and Persia therein'.²²⁶

²²³ Masson, *Narrative*, I, v.

²²⁴ Masson, *Narrative*, I, vi.

²²⁵ Masson, *Narrative*, I, viii.

²²⁶ Masson, *Narrative*, I, ix. This mirrors an argument made by Hopkins that officials ignored dispatches from figures such as Masson that did not refer to the familiar 'threat conceptualization' of Russia. Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*.

This apparent outsider status, one in which he was beyond the confines of official strictures, was partially a self-representation. Masson's early official dispatches betrayed a far more imperialistic character. In a September 1834 dispatch to Claude Wade he advocated a more involved British policy towards Afghanistan. Having outlined the possibility of supporting Dost Muhammad Khan against his political competitors, he suggested that 'a more effectual and magnificent plan for the British Government to adopt under the present political circumstances of these countries, would be the permanent occupation by conquest or treaty of Kabul and its dependencies ... No time can be more fitting than the present for a grand political coup when the chief of Kabul is about to enter into a conflict with a powerful enemy [the Sikhs] and when the country is agitated by factions'.²²⁷ Echoing a distinction that Burnes made in his account, Masson also delineated the political community between the ruling Barakzai and disenfranchised Saddozai, claiming the rulers of Afghanistan can 'depend only on the support and fidelity of their own particular tribe (the Barekzie) while the other great Duranee leaders not only own no obedience to them; but are ready to league together in any attempt that holds out a prospect of overthrowing the Barekzie ascendancy'.²²⁸

Yet this dualism between the Saddozai and Barakzai factions masked a far more complicated political history that can be detected in his account, and to an extent in the works of other contemporary travelers. Masson's work demonstrates the sheer fluidity in alliances that persisted at this time, giving rise to the frequent British interpretation of interminable fractiousness, and 'intrigue'. Masson's later role as a newswriter amplified this aspect of his reporting, embedded as he was in court politics. The situation buttresses Thomas Barfield's observation that rulership was the preserve of a clique of professional rulers.²²⁹ In this case, largely the offspring of Sirafray Khan, who had displaced the ruling Saddozai elite.

²²⁷ NAI, Foreign Department, Political Consultations, 'Afghanistan: Masson (Mr) report on the political state and resources of', No.46, 30 September 1834, p.153.

²²⁸ NAI, Foreign Department, Political Consultations, 'Afghanistan: Masson (Mr) report on the political state and resources of', No.45, 21 November 1834, p.130.

²²⁹ Barfield, *Afghanistan*.

In the accounts the narrative behind this rise to power of the Barakzai elite is traced back to the murder of Fitiḥ Khan, and the Barakzai outrage that it prompted. Yet, the more detailed travel account of Masson shows that the various competitors for power were not averse to buying into the Saddozai franchise if it gave their claim to sovereignty the veneer of royal authority.²³⁰ Equally, although outside incursions by the British and other later powers would, as Barfield notes, draw in previously ostracised competing groups, even at this early stage of Afghanistan's status as a polity such groups were courted on an ad hoc basis. In some cases, as with the Kohistanis, the Yusufzai, and the Ghilzai, these groups were regularly courted. Indeed, the Hazaras too were not uninvolved in dynastic quarrels. This presents a more nuanced view of the evolution of Afghanistan's political ecology at this time, a view that the essentialized concept of Barakzai-Saddozai conflict was unable to capture. It also hints at the deeper structural forces that inclined the British to become involved, as well as the manner in which they would later become partially instrumentalized by these disenfranchised actors.

²³⁰ Such was the case for example in the collaboration between Muhammad Azim Khan (the half brother of Dost Muhammad Khan), and the exiled Shah Shuja in Azim Khan's attempt to dethrone the Saddozai King, Shah Mahmud, prior to Dost Muhammad Khan's ascent to power. Masson, *Narrative*, III, 44; Dalrymple, *Return of a King*, 45.

Conclusion: Contextualizing Early European Explorers and the Afghanistan 'Knowledge Community'

This chapter has sought to recover the story of a very specific colonial 'knowledge community' that began to emerge in the nineteenth century, made up of soldiers, scholars, and adventurers, with a keen interest in Afghanistan and Central Asia. These men were the leading edge of colonial expansion in this region. As with the frontiers of British control elsewhere, their activities are a reminder of the uneven, unpredictable, and often unofficial manner of this process of expansion, one that began in almost all cases with the accumulation of knowledge. This provides an important counter-narrative to many existing histories of these figures.

There is, in parts of the literature, a preoccupation with the espionage activities of the likes of Masson, Burnes, and Pottinger in particular. The impression given in such interpretations is that the only aspect of these journeys worth considering is the extent to which they informed a wider geo-strategic pattern – dominated by the considerations of Anglo-Russian relations. The events unfolding within Afghanistan itself, the political, economic, and social changes to which that country was subject are often overlooked. This appears to be particularly the case with the diplomatic histories that often inform debates within IR. It is often as though Afghanistan is not granted the possibility of its own history when considering imperial rivalries in this region. The Afghanistan context is neglected.²³¹ More specifically, for our purposes here, such perspectives obscure the wider cultural *milieu* in which such individuals were operating. Ironically, this 'epistemic imperialism', this quest for knowledge, this drive for ever-more detail, legibility, and familiarity provides a wealth of detail on precisely this 'Afghanistan context' that the more sensationalist readings fail to account for – albeit heavily filtered by the prejudices of the time.

²³¹ Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War*; Barfield, *Afghanistan*.

To be strictly historicist, the individuals who traversed, and travelled through Central Asia during the nineteenth century were not lionized at the time as dashing intelligence operatives. The emergence of the spy as a 'heroic figure' was an Edwardian innovation in terms of cultural signifiers - one particularly associated with the derring-do of those caught up in the First World War.²³² In the South Asian context this figure admittedly arrived a little earlier with the publication in 1901 of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, the literary progenitor of the notion of the 'great game' with its eponymous hero Kimball O'Hara providing the youthful model of intrepid, espionage-driven adventurism. Yet this figure has been projected back in time for the nineteenth century 'great game' era, bestowing such individuals with a romantic air that was never their projection. These individuals, Burnes in particular, were celebrated in England for their adventurism, and for their scholarship, not their cloak and dagger.

This travel-based 'investigative modality'²³³ had a powerful allure. Pushing forth into as-yet unknown territory was in this way an opportunity for an inquisitive empire, coming to terms with its newly-acquired global reach to project and reaffirm its identity on canvasses new: a co-constitutive moment of cultural reaffirmation; the essence of imperial arrogance. These works then, provide a reminder that 'empires create in the imperial center of power an obsessive need to present and re-present its peripheries and its others continually to itself.' Empire thus 'becomes dependent on its others to know itself.'²³⁴ The details that these travelers brought back were not simply written off as strategic context, or background detail in an otherwise enemy-centric terrain; they were part and parcel of the colonial endeavour. It remains a supreme irony that the story of the great game encourages the kind of sanctioned ignorance that is so often associated with the imperial mentality. Dealing with this colonial literature requires then, an appreciation of its cultural significance as much as its informational significance, and in particular, an understanding that very often, these two ostensibly separate

²³² Satia, *Spies in Arabia*.

²³³ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*.

²³⁴ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 4.

realms of knowing were in fact two sides of the same coin; mutually constitutive, and reflexively creating the conditions and possibilities for the other.

This alternative historical perspective that identifies colonial knowledge as a key site of study, also offers new insights into the manner in which Afghanistan was entering the collective colonial consciousness at this time. As this chapter has shown, there was an intellectual history behind British understandings of the Afghan polity in the early nineteenth century; one that was more than the story of geopolitical threat. The 'idea' of Afghanistan was built on the corpus of knowledge provided by the individuals surveyed in this chapter – in particular, the works of Elphinstone, Burnes, and Masson. This was fundamentally a meaning-making enterprise that drew upon an atmosphere of European ideas that were carried into Afghanistan's political space by European explorers, functioning very much as transnational actors. But these explorers were equally dependent on the communities amongst whom they moved, and upon whom they often relied for knowledge, information, transport, and protection. As such this was partly an exchange, an interaction, a dialogue; an unequal one, but an exchange nonetheless. This moment of transference was imperfect, and about to become more so as colonial knowledge on Afghanistan underwent a further transformation from knowledge to policy advice. This is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Three

Afghanistan as a Policy Problem: Towards the First Anglo-Afghan War

Following the initial explorations of Elphinstone, Masson, Burnes, and others during the early decades of the nineteenth century, Afghanistan fell under an increasingly penetrative imperial gaze from the mid-1830s to the outbreak of the First Anglo-Afghan War. This chapter assesses how an emergent 'idea' of Afghanistan, initiated in part by European explorers, intersected and overlapped with the policy agenda at this time. This study is instructive not only in terms of what it tells us of the imperial policy-making process but it also provides a case study in colonial knowledge and its instrumentalization. In a sense, this was a process of regionalizing and internationalizing local knowledge – feeding it into a wider geopolitical information order. Contrary to received wisdom, the policies that resulted from this, though ultimately leading to the First Anglo-Afghan war, were fiercely contested by many who were most familiar with the region and its politics. Nonetheless, these decisions and the events that resulted would irrevocably change British perceptions of the problem they faced in Afghanistan. In many ways, the region was becoming socialized into a new cognitive universe, closing down the scope for latitude in interpretation of the problems they faced and leading to the emergence of a new Afghanistan of the mind.

Four key areas of contestation are worthy of particular attention. Firstly, there was the key concern of what exactly was the threat presented by Afghanistan. On the one hand there was the disputed threat of Russian encroachment, thought to be operating through Persian proxies. The exact nature of this expansion was uncertain and this occasionally manifested itself

in 'information panics'¹ in which certain types of information were prioritized out of a fear of a deficit in understanding. Indeed in certain quarters the period leading up to the First Anglo-Afghan war can be seen as one long 'information panic' over the very possibility of this incursion. But this was far from the only, or indeed the most significant story.² Adding to these fears were concerns over Afghan-Sikh relations. Forward-thinking British officials were beginning to imagine the regional landscape following the death of the aging Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh. Aggrieved by their territorial losses to the Sikhs during the turbulence of the Afghan civil wars of the 1830s, any succession struggle in the Punjab could potentially embolden the Afghans in attempting to reclaim their lost territorial possessions. It was the uncertainty over the outcome of this instability that further contributed to British fears.

A second area of contestation concerned the means of British intervention in the region. This dispute boiled down to whether commercial and pecuniary measures would suffice, or whether military options should be prepared. The debate brought in wider contextual factors relating to the status of the East India Company at this time. But it also tied in with debates surrounding the efficacy of commerce as a tool of expansion and control, versus the utility of force as a method of signalling the British sphere of influence and staking out territorial boundaries before the initiative was lost. This debate was not simply over efficacy however. It also concerned normative questions over the propriety of intervention too. In some quarters commerce was seen as a veneer for aggressive measures. Those advocating a pacific response disputed the wisdom of commercial moves feeling it would lead inevitably to military measures. But non-intervention took on many hues. For those who did advocate commercial exploration, non-intervention concerned the avoidance of becoming entangled in political, and sometimes territorial, disputes. These disputes were in part a function of Afghanistan's ongoing successionist struggles, but the reasons behind them were poorly understood by the British at this time.

¹ Bayly, *Empire and Information*.

² Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*; Hopkins, 'The Myth of the 'Great Game'.

Thirdly, and related to the above point, there was the question as to whether Afghanistan could likely function as a consolidated polity, or whether a more fragmented collection of chiefships was more likely. In this area of dispute the British were importing their experiences from elsewhere in South Asia. Whilst divide and rule had a seductive appeal, a unified polity was seen as more appropriate not only in accordance with their own normative agendas of appropriate forms of governance, but also in relation to the ends that they hoped the Afghan territory would serve as a 'buffer' between Persia and Russia. In the absence of a more granular perspective of how this would actually work, however, the British were apt to fall back on familiar criteria. This led to the imputation of a historiography proposing that Afghan 'anarchy' was a problem of faded Saddozai glory; a direct legacy of the historiographical investigative modality that characterised elements of Elphinstone's and Burnes' works, alongside others.

To this end, the fourth area of dispute concerned whom the British should back. Driving this debate were perceptions of the legitimacy of Dost Muhammad Khan, his various brothers who were competing for his throne, and the deposed ruler Shah Shuja, a man with whom the British had long been acquainted. This area of contestation was also shaped by Afghan-Sikh relations since resolving these would be determined by who sat in Kabul.

These areas of contestation provide a useful thematic framework for understanding the policy debate, and they demonstrate the ways in which preconceptions of Afghanistan provided the epistemic criteria for the policies emerging at this time. However, they did not always manifest themselves in a clear-cut manner. As the previous chapter showed, evolving at this time was an unrefined 'idea of Afghanistan', weaving together multiple strands of British imaginings. This was an emergent Afghanistan of the mind, but as yet, there was not one single idea. The outcomes of these contestations provided the reasoning by which policy-makers could 'frame' Afghanistan policy, but it should be recognised that these were not the only interpretations that could

have been drawn. Whilst this framing was beholden to rational policy calculation they were circumscribed in terms of what was reasonably possible by the knowledge order that had been established and developed by the knowledge entrepreneurs of Elphinstone, Burnes, Masson *et al.* This provided the parameters of the debate. Understanding why events were 'historically so and not otherwise' requires attention to the concepts they established.

In addition to these contested themes, it should be acknowledged that this 'epistemic imperialism' was not solely the creation of the imperial mind. There were elements of hybridity in the understandings that the British developed at this times: both the blending of 'local' knowledge with British understandings; the grafting of South Asian practices on to the Afghan context; and the incorporation of regional political norms – particularly in the concept of territorial possessions and their links to treaty stipulations. As such, this was not just the story of conquest, but rather a casting around for an appropriate blend of normatively sanctioned policy prescriptions.

That said, it is important not to take the argument too far. The practicalities of achieving British interests, which were themselves a construction of threat based partly on the importation of European notions of ontological security,³ closed down a more 'discursively competent' policy response. British policy-makers were ultimately forced to fall back on familiar understandings. In this sense, the common refrain that the British 'knew nothing' about Afghanistan needs amendment. The British knew 'something', they just didn't 'know' what they might have, had the circumstances been more conducive to incrementalism in policy prescriptions. The British failed partly due to their misperceptions of the Afghan polity, but they did not necessarily fail for lack

³ Ontological security proposes that states seek not just physical security, but security of the self (ontological security) in the form of their own identity, and as such seek to define themselves against other states and their respective identities. Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12/3 (2006), 341-70; Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity: habits, capabilities and ontological security', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13/2 (2006), 270-85; Brent J. Steele, 'Ontological security and the power of self-identity: British neutrality and the American Civil War', *Review of International Studies*, 31 (2005), 519-40.

of knowledge and information, this was in large part a failure of strategic imagination brought on by a demand for agreement over the best course to pursue. In this sense, the failure was one of 'closure'. Ironically the intelligence failures that followed were a direct consequence of these policies as the British lost their ability to operate in any meaningful sense in the Afghan territories. It was following the failures of the Anglo-Afghan war, that the discourses more familiar to proponents of orientalism really began to take hold.

An important aspect of explaining this imagination failure rests on paying attention to the 'political'. Adding to their works, in the lead up to the events of 1838-1842, Burnes and Masson provided the bulk of information emanating from Kabul as agents of the Governor-General. Masson filled this role officially from 1835-1838, with Burnes joining him as his immediate superior in 1837. They both left following the failure of negotiations with Dost Muhammad Khan in 1838. Prior to this, during his second commercial mission of 1836, Burnes and his collaborators provided numerous dispatches and extensive reports on developments in the region. These reports, sent to the secretary of the Governor-General, represent a key information chain and a telling catalogue of the ways in which British understandings were being shaped at the time.

To the names of Burnes and Masson we can also add those who took up positions within the mechanisms of British Government and East India Company. Captain Claude Wade was in charge of intelligence collation at Ludhiana,⁴ a role that allowed him a certain amount of power over the nature of the information that was brought to the Governor-General Lord Auckland. Similarly, Auckland's two secretaries, John Colvin and William Hay Macnaghten had the ear of the Lord Auckland and oversaw the reports crossing his desk. Outside of India, the British envoy at Tehran William Ellis and his successor John McNeill both held influential positions due to their ease of communication with London and, particularly in the case of McNeill,

⁴ Now in the modern Indian state of Punjab, near the border with Pakistan.

in their reporting of Persian and Russian activities especially with respect to Herat. McNeill's deputy Charles Stoddart, played a role in reporting back from Herat during the Persian siege of that city from November 1837 to September 1838. In Herat itself, and reporting to McNeill via Stoddart, was Lieutenant Eldred Pottinger, who had found himself stranded in the city after having taken leave from the Indian Army to travel through Afghanistan.

Whilst the earlier works of Elphinstone, Burnes, and Masson had encompassed a broad sweep of Afghanistan's historical, political, and societal constitution, this knowledge was now being filtered by an increasingly overbearing policy programme. This was a programme that favoured certain types of information over others, and contained built-in assumptions as to the connections between such information. These filters operated in a slightly different fashion depending on which location one considered. Whereas London prioritised the grand strategic picture, Calcutta remained more cognisant of regional complexities and imperatives, meanwhile the political agents at Ludhiana and Kabul, with their highly granular perspective, were more aware of the nuance in particular policy prescriptions. Therefore, just as Ulrike Hilleman has demonstrated with respect to British Imperial relations with China, British imaginings were becoming distinguished by 'contact zones' – geographically separated, yet interconnected sites at which imaginings of Afghanistan encountered emergent policy imperatives.⁵ It was at these sites that war with Afghanistan became imaginable in the first place. To understand how this process unfolded, it is first necessary to understand how the policy-making system worked.

Anatomy of a Policy Making Process: The Institutional Context

The policy-making apparatus in India during the 1830s was in a process of transition in a number of important ways. Firstly, the East India Company (EIC) was reaching the twilight years of its role in running British territorial

⁵ Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge*.

concerns in India. Having acted as a more autonomous agent throughout the eighteenth century it became increasingly subordinate to the British Government. In 1773 the Regulating Act had brought shared control of Indian Affairs between the Government in London and the EIC. The India Act of 1784 then effectively rendered the Company subordinate to the Crown, establishing a Board of Control comprising six privy councillors, including at least two Ministers of the Crown, and possessing the right to issue orders to the Company's servants in India.⁶ In 1813 the Company lost its monopoly of trade in India, and in 1834 it also lost its trade monopoly with China. The previous year's charter renewal in 1833 had further eroded the Company's political power with clause 39 stipulating 'that the superintendence, direction, and control of whole civil and military government of all the said territories and revenues in India shall be and is hereby vested in a Governor-general and counsellors, to be styled "The Governor-general of India in Council'.⁷

At the time this was a position filled by Lord William Bentinck, the progenitor of the 'Age of Reform' that served to cut the costs of the army and the Indian civil service, thus turning the Company's troubled finances back into the black. Between 1829 and 1835 the budget deficit of one and a half million pounds sterling was turned into a budget surplus of half a million pounds.⁸ Although Pitt's 1784 India Act had vested the Court of Directors of the East India Company with power to nominate the positions of Governor-General, the Governorships of the Presidencies, and the chiefs of the Army Commands, these nominations were usually made by the Ministry, and were subject to the approbation of the Crown. In reality therefore, the legal powers of the Court of Directors over the nomination effectively amounted to a right of veto.⁹ By 1833 even this circumscribed authority had been eroded as the

⁶ Norris, *The First Afghan War*, 5-6.

⁷ Phillip Lawson, *The East India Company: A History*, (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1993), 159.

⁸ Christopher A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), 121.

⁹ Peter J. N. Tuck (ed.), *The East India Company 1600-1858* (London: Routledge, 1998), 14.

Ministry ignored the Court by sending Lord Auckland to succeed Bentinck.¹⁰ The government was beginning to exert its authority.

The Governor-General at this time was also beginning to enjoy a more exalted position in the British colonial policy-making hierarchy. Despite the appearance of metropolitan centralism, British India was beginning to craft a distinct foreign policy for itself, one that would be more cognizant of regional realities, rather than as a tool of balancing what were essentially European geopolitical concerns. In part, this shift was a recognition of the need for British India to take its frontier security more seriously. The growing intellectual climate of 'Russophobia' in London was contributing to a metropolitan concern with India's north-west. As early as 16 December 1829, the President of the Board of Control Lord Ellenborough had proposed to the then Prime Minister Wellington that 'the Indian Government should be authorized to act as an Asiatic power, ignoring the effect of its actions on Britain and Europe, if the Russians moved towards Kabul.'¹¹ In practice, this left the Governor-General in something of a halfway house. Although the authority to wage war was not conferred on the Governor-General, Wellington went so far as to allow him more autonomy in making those expenditures necessary to meet the threat.

With a growing interest in the north-west, the importance of 'politicals' on the frontier was beginning to grow. Shortly before his conversation with the Prime Minister, Ellenborough had written to the Governor of Bombay, Sir John Malcolm, and expressed his opinion over where the shortfall lay in appraising the situation in the north-west: 'What we ought to have is *Information*', he insisted. 'The first, the second, and the third thing a government ought always to have is *Information*'.¹² To this end, in 1831 an 'able and discreet officer' in the form of Alexander Burnes was selected to

¹⁰ Tuck, *The East India Company 1600-1858*, 297. This was after the Directors had already been ignored once on their choice of Sir Charles Metcalfe for the position. The Ministry appointed instead, 'the almost unknown Lord Heytesbury'. Tuck, *The East India Company 1600-1858*, 197.

¹¹ Norris, *The First Afghan War*, 31.

¹² Whitteridge, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan*, 18.

escort horses to Runjit Singh, a mission that would serve to satiate this thirst for knowledge of territories of the Indus and beyond.¹³ Meanwhile Colonel Henry Pottinger was put in charge of satisfying the commercial ambitions of Ellenborough as well as his intelligence needs.

Three sites of information and knowledge exchange were thus central to the picture that the British were beginning to build up. Firstly, London, the Cabinet, and the Court of Directors; secondly Calcutta, and the Office of the Governor-General; and thirdly the Punjab, with the activities of the 'politicals' making their way northwards, and reporting back to Pottinger, and later Claude Wade, who became the Political Agent at Ludhiana, reporting directly to the Governor-General. This arrangement is significant not only for what it tells us of the channels through which information, knowledge, and instructions were passed, but for the way in which it demonstrated the constant negotiation of centre-periphery understandings of the precise problems that the British believed they faced in this region. Each of these sites of exchange differed in their definitions of the salient topics.

The Narrative Form of the Russian Menace

A key aspect of the policy contestations that defined British thinking on Afghanistan in the 1830s concerned the exact nature of the threat presented by regional actors. In numerous histories of both the First and Second Anglo-Afghan wars, the spectre of the Russian threat as a motive for British actions looms large. In essence, this is not surprising, but it is potentially misleading. Disputing the validity of the Russian threat as an explanation for the First

¹³ This mission, the first of two that Burnes would carry out during the 1830s, would result in the publication of Burnes' *Travels into Bokhara*. The Afghanistan leg of this journey was not originally intended as part of the trip, rather Burnes lobbied the Governor-General for an extension to this trip.

Anglo-Afghan war is not in itself a novel proposal.¹⁴ But this begs the question as to why it is such a constant feature in the literature?

The focus on Anglo-Russian relations is in part a post-hoc rationalization. Later references to the 'great game' have induced many writers to look upon the Anglo-Afghan war as a precursor to these rivalries. Arguably, the contemporary setting provided a further rationalization as the Cold War gave the impression of an enduring Russian sense of historic destiny to dominate global politics.¹⁵ However, narrative forms exist in a textual sense as well as in a cognitive sense as 'instruments of the mind',¹⁶ and the permanence of the Russian threat narrative is in part a reflection of its prominence in certain public debates at the time. In turn, these found a home in the archives documenting high-level policy debates.¹⁷

The intellectual and policy climate in Britain during the 1820s and 1830s was certainly favourable to 'Russophobia'. In 1828 President of the Board of Control, Lord Ellenborough opined that 'Russia will attempt, by conquest or by influence, to secure Persia as a road to the Indus, I have the most intimate conviction.' Colonel De Lacy Evans' 1828 work *On the Designs of Russia* captured a public mood wary of Russian moves against the Ottoman Empire. Following the treaty of Adrianople which ended that war in 1829, Wellington's Foreign Secretary Lord Aberdeen warned that 'Russia holds the keys' in Asia Minor. Meanwhile De Lacy Evans released in the same year his follow up work, the provocatively titled *Practicability of an Invasion of British India*. The President of the Board of Council, Lord Ellenborough sent copies to the British representatives in Persia and Bombay.¹⁸ Conolly's 1834 release of

¹⁴ Among those who have pointed out a more local explanation in the form of Anglo-Sikh relations for example, see Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, 126; Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*.

¹⁵ Peter the Great died in 1725, but as the *doyenne* of the great game narrative, Peter Hopkirk points out in the introduction to *The Great Game*, his instructions to his heirs and successors on his death bed that Russia must achieve its historical destiny to dominate the world have long exerted a powerful influence on perceptions of Russian ambition. The 'twin keys' to this world domination, according to Peter the Great, were possession of Constantinople and India. Hopkirk, *The Great Game*, 20.

¹⁶ Jerome Bruner, 'The Narrative Construction of Reality', *Critical Enquiry*, 18/1 (1991), 6.

¹⁷ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*.

¹⁸ Norris, *The First Afghan War*, 30.

his *Journey to the North of India* also provided material for those who sought to portray an imminent threat, including the noted Russophobe and alarmist David Urquart in his popular volume *England, France, Russia and Turkey*, which soon ran to five editions.¹⁹

Despite this apparently fevered atmosphere, much of the debate was founded on paranoia stemming from an absence of accurate information to the contrary. The British envoy to Persia, Sir John Macdonald, perhaps indicated this prevailing sense of ignorance, when he wrote to his colleague in Constantinople that the Russians would easily conquer Transcaspia, and once they had Bokhara 'the way is short and easy from the Oxus to the Indus. The Russians would be astonished at the facility of their conquests'.²⁰ As the rudimentary cartography in Elphinstone's *Account* had already shown, the Hindu Kush was likely to provide a significant hurdle. In addition, any military force would have to contend with vast deserts, scarce water, and very little in the way of food sources, all of which would put a heavy demand on supply trains that would need to be heavily guarded. The supposed Russian threat was a convenient excuse for an expansionist policy on India's north-east, but at the time this was envisaged as an expansion of information systems and trade, not of military intervention.

The dominance of the grand strategic picture at the metropole was in many ways inevitable. 'The Russian army might not come at last', wrote Kaye, 'but it was clearly the duty of an Indian statesman to know how it would endeavour to come.'²¹ Faced with this responsibility, the familiar threat of Russia provided for policy-makers a form of ontological security in the face of scarce information and knowledge from elsewhere; it was a familiar 'threat conceptualization'²² that most in the metropole could agree on. Put within the context of Ellenborough's demand for Britain to begin to act as an 'Asiatic Power' this takes on an additional significance. Although this shift in

¹⁹ G. J. Adler, 'The Key to India?: Britain and the Herat Problem 1830-1863 – Part 1', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 10/2 (1974), 188-9.

²⁰ Whitteridge, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan*, 18.

²¹ Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan*, Vol. I, 170.

²² Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*.

geopolitical purpose was ostensibly one of practicality, it was a shift that carried with it representations that remained resonant with European geopolitical concerns. British policy makers were increasingly given licence to connect representations of Russia in Europe to the Asiatic operating theatre. Russian moves in Persia and Afghanistan became part of the 'Eastern Question', and this remained connected in part to European considerations. This was not lost on the Russians, who 'could bring pressure to bear on the British in Europe by making their flesh creep in India'.²³ Exactly how they would choose to do this though, is the important consideration here, and brings understandings of Afghanistan back into the fray as a central concern.

Whilst the British had decided at one level that Russia provided some form of threat, it was the *nature* of the threat that determined the initial response. The military danger presented by Russia was easily dismissed as mere speculation through much of the 1830s, but it was the influence of Russia, and particularly the manifestations of this in forms of rumour that posed the more worrying challenge. The British had for some time been comfortable with the view that their position in India owed much to widely held perceptions of their superior military power. As the Governor-General of Madras, Sir Charles Metcalfe put it, '[s]ome say that our Empire in India rests on opinion, others on main force. It in fact depends on both. ... Our force does not operate so much by its actual strength as by the impression which it produces, and that impression is the opinion by which we hold India.'²⁴

The impressions held by the populace were thus of central importance to the British, and partly by virtue of their exclusion from Indian society, the British worried constantly about this image. In the context of the Russian threat, the British feared the rumour of encroaching Russian forces and the destabilizing effect this could have on their fragile edifice of power. This was felt to be particularly acute at the fringes of British Indian territory. As Lord Ellenborough, one of the more paranoid policy makers noted in 1830: 'We dread ... not so much actual invasion by Russia, as the moral effect which

²³ Whitteridge, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan*, 16.

²⁴ Demetrius, C. Boulger, *Lord William Bentinck* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), 175.

would be produced amongst our own subjects and among the Princes with whom we are allied, by the continued apprehension of that event.’²⁵ As he also pointed out, this had financial implications since military preparations against outside threats would require efforts to counter internal unrest too. To prepare for this would require a diplomatic presence, as well as an accurate and efficient information system, hence the need to send ‘politicals’ to Afghanistan. Needless to say, the policy environment provided a fertile arena for rumour and panic to take hold.

The difficulty for Masson and Burnes (who joined Masson in 1837) was that although Kabul was by now functioning as a forward political agency, the intelligence that was most ardently required in London related to Russian activities, and therefore concerned events that were taking place several hundred miles away, a weakness acknowledged in one of Burnes’ initial dispatches having arrived in Kabul when he expressed ‘some small doubt’ as to the ‘entire correctness’ of his reports on Russia.²⁶ Despite these shortcomings Burnes was able to surmise that Russian commercial influence had met with mixed progress.

In 1835 the Russians had established a military post on the eastern shore of the Caspian at Mungusluck, causing offence to the Chief of Khiva and prompting him to solicit the King of Bokhara and the Khan of Kokan for aid against the Russians, which was not forthcoming. In July 1836 Emperor Nicholas addressed a commercial fair in Nejnei Novogorod, and conferred with the merchants looking for ways to promote their interests. But at the same time he detained forty six merchants from Orgunge, sending them to Moscow. Once again the Khan of Khiva requested aid from Bokhara and Kokan. This time the King of Bokhara agreed to send an agent to the emperor

²⁵ Quoted in Whitteridge, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan*, 31. Demonstrating the longevity of this concept, it was later repeated in an 1836 dispatch by George Trevelyan, at the time the Secretary to the Government of India. Cited in Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, 36.

²⁶ IOR/V/27/270/7, ‘Views and Prospects of Russia in Central Asia, Particularly Towards Khiva and Herat’, No.5, Burnes to Macnaghten, dated 20 October 1837, p.23. Burnes indicated that these reports were based on the ‘good authority’ of merchant traders travelling between Kabul and Turkistan.

to negotiate for their release. Burnes reported that a caravan had recently arrived with intelligence that the request for the merchants' release had been rejected and they had been marched to Siberia, adding, '[t]his intelligence has been received with great dissatisfaction in Toorkistan, and for the present will lead to a suspension of all trade between that country, and Russia. It is even stated that the Chiefs of Kokan, Bokhara and Khiva will league together, and take measures to capture Russians and their property'.²⁷

Burnes noted that should Russia decide to punish Khiva, Persian interests would be aligned with such a move since Persia had thousands of subjects enslaved there, but this was not considered a likely scenario. Indeed, Burnes was keen to downplay the Russian threat, explaining their interests in Persia in commercial terms: 'To a country wanting money, and abounding in raw materials as Russia, any new outlet to her commerce must be as dear as to Great Britain. We shall thus find a strong motive for the attention directed by her to this quarter, without believing that she contemplates the gigantic enterprise of invading either Cabool, or India.'²⁸

In addition to the opacity of this 'distant threat', British agents were stymied by the Russian tendency to operate through what were in effect freelance intelligence operatives. Indeed Henry Willock, the former British envoy to Persia sent a blistering – if somewhat belated – letter to Lord Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary on the eve of the passing of the Army of the Indus into Afghanistan pointing out that '[m]uch more will always be attributed to Russia than she really designs, and to this she has no objection, so long as her direct agency cannot be discovered; and when it is laid open, she has no hesitation in sacrificing her maladroitness agents.'²⁹ Intelligence reports linking individuals to Russia were often based on nothing more than conjecture.³⁰

²⁷ IOR/V/27/270/7, 'Views and Prospects of Russia in Central Asia, Particularly Towards Khiva and Herat', No.5, Burnes to Macnaghten, dated 20 October 1837, p.25.

²⁸ IOR/V/27/270/7, 'Views and Prospects of Russia in Central Asia, Particularly Towards Khiva and Herat', No.5, Burnes to Macnaghten, dated 20 October 1837, p.26.

²⁹ Mss Eur F88, p.104-111, Henry Willock to the Right Honourable The Lord Viscount Palmerston, 1 December 1838. The correspondence was forwarded to Elphinstone in a letter dated 7 December 1838. It is worth pointing out that the most notorious of the Russian Agents to be spotted in Kabul, Lieutenant Vitkevitch, was found dead in his room shortly

To sum up therefore, Russian moves provided a useful framing of the overarching reasons for an increasing presence in west of the Indus, but this was a flimsy framing of regional politics based more on paranoia than evidence. There was a quasi-causal representation here of incremental growth in Russian influence through Persia, Herat, Kandahar, Kabul and then India. This made sense to the grand strategists in London but it was barely perceptible on the ground. In Calcutta, the panic was far less palpable; as late as 9 April 1837 Auckland casually noted to Hobhouse that Dost Muhammad Khan, '[i]n his pressing need ... has courted Persia and he has courted Russia, and he has courted us'.³¹ The fact that this did not prompt immediate concern in India is telling. Indeed, a strong argument against taking actions on such evidence was that this would simply be to fall into Russia's trap. The aforementioned Henry Willock pointed this out in his letter to Palmerston, noting that Russia had observed from the actions of the British that in response to 'the presence of her Envoy and a few of her Engineers with the Persian Army at Herat ... something like a panic has occasioned the whole of the disposable force of India to be placed in motion, for the purpose of effecting projects of which the expence [sic] incalculable, the policy questionable, and the result at best uncertain. She has ... learnt the mode of embarrassing our finances without putting a single battalion into motion.'³² The fear that Russia was deliberately instigating acts of subversion was not

after he returned to Russia. His death remains a mystery but he had apparently committed suicide. He is often erroneously credited with having driven the British to war with the Afghans over fears of Russian involvement. In fact, his treatment in Kabul was far from friendly, with Dost Muhammad Khan barely registering his presence at least until the failure of negotiations with Burnes over the status of Peshawar.

³⁰ A good example of this is the alleged correspondence between the Persian Government and Kambar Ali Khan, the Persian envoy to Kabul. The letter purported to show that the Persians were attempting to gather intelligence and win over the Afghan 'chiefs' to their own interests. The suspicion Burnes raised of this, linking it to the Russians, seemed to be based on nothing more than a feeling that the Persians were not intelligent enough to come up with such a plan. As Burnes put it: 'I have always considered the Persians to be [the] sharpest nation in Asia, but the intelligence there exhibited, is even beyond my standard of them. Is it not a Russian paper entirely?' MSS. Eur. E. 161, Correspondence III, Burnes to McNeill, Enclosure No. 4, No. 3, 633, 'From Capt. Alexander Burnes'. The correspondence to which Burnes refers was also relayed to Masson by Burnes and can be found in Enclosure No. 3, 'John McNeill to A. Burnes, Tehran, March 13th 1837', and a set of translations contained therein of the Shah of Persia's communications, marked No.9, 'From Persian Govt to Kumber Ali Khan, envoy to Kabul.'

³¹ Broughton Papers, Add Ms 36473, Auckland to Hobhouse, 9 April 1837, p.120.

³² MSS Eur F88, Henry Willock to Elphinstone, 7 December 1838, p.108.

only lacking in empirical evidence, it was a classic case of projection. In 1838 the Russian Foreign Minister sent a dispatch to the Russian Ambassador in London decrying the 'indefatigable activity displayed by English travelers to spread disquiet among the people of Central Asia, and to carry agitation even into the heart of the countries bordering on our frontier'.³³

Dealing with rumour required a much more delicate touch throughout much of the 1830s. Nonetheless, the constant demand emanating from London for information on Russia began to warp the intelligence picture, generating a misleading picture of the *casus belli* for historians, and shaping the definition of the problem that the British were facing.

A Strategy of Influence: Trade and Commerce

Whilst the information system began to acquire an element of theory-laden observation in the form of the Russian threat at the metropole, the discussion from Calcutta remained very much one of non-intervention in a political, or a military sense. Instead the manner of influence rested explicitly on trade and commerce.

Throughout the 1830s non-intervention was a dominant theme with respect to Anglo-Afghan relations. Company officials were repeatedly warned off any relations of a political nature, and any British interference was deliberately low-key. This did not negate interference by proxy however. In 1831 and again in 1834, Shah Shuja, the exiled leader in Ludhiana mounted expeditions with the tacit support of the British and the financial support of the EIC. The rationale behind this was that Shuja would find the means to mount his expedition regardless of British involvement, and that by advancing his pension – which was the extent of British financial support – they could at least keep an eye on developments in this quarter. The indication of British interest was strictly guarded against however. In December 1831 Prinsep

³³ Quoted in Whitteridge, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan*, 32.

wrote to Wade informing him that 'the Governor-general approves your keeping him informed of the substance of [negotiations with Shah Shuja over his finances] but does not deem it necessary that you should in any way interfere with advice or otherwise with either party.'³⁴ In 1833, ahead of Shuja's second attempt this position was reiterated, this time by Macnaghten who expressed the Governor-general's opinion 'that we ought not to take any interest in the plans connected with the route of Shooja-ool-Moolk, and should an impression exist in any quarter that the British Government feels otherwise than indifferent as to the movements of the Shah, you will do your utmost to remove it.'³⁵ The British were also keen to express their non-intervention to the Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh, at the time of Shah Shuja's venture.³⁶ This attitude of non-intervention would extend to Afghan-Sikh relations too.³⁷

The attitude of non-intervention did not extend to trade however, indeed commerce was the preferred mode of influencing the Afghan state in the early stages of British involvement. This mission was in line with explorations being carried out elsewhere under the aegis of the EIC, including Colonel Francis Rawdon Chesney, who between 1835 and 1837 was engaged in the exploration of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in order to assess the prospects of their navigability.³⁸ The British had through their own travels constructed an image of Afghanistan as a trading corridor, a perception no doubt heightened by the tendency of some of the early travellers to attach themselves to itinerant traders, *kafillas*, and *lohani* merchants.³⁹ As discussed

³⁴ IOR/L/PS/20/MEMO1/15, No. 2, H.T. Prinsep Esq to Captain Wade, 4 December 1831, p. 4.

³⁵ IOR/L/PS/20/MEMO1/15, No. 24, Macnaghten to Wade, 5 March 1833, p. 15.

³⁶ IOR/L/PS/20/MEMO1/15, No. 27, Bentinck to Runjit Singh, 30 April 1833, p. 16. Bentinck wrote, '[t]his is a matter with which the British Government has no concern, and it has therefore taken no pains to inquire into it. The Shah's success or otherwise depends upon the will of Providence, and the favourable disposition towards him or otherwise of the inhabitants of that quarter'.

³⁷ IOR/F/4/1680/67026, Burnes to Wade, 3 August 1837, p. 228. Referring to the possibility of his involvement in arbitrating the Afghan-Sikh dispute Burnes wrote 'acting up to the spirit of the instructions of Government conveyed to me on the 15th May last. I feel bound to counsel the Chief of Kabul to make terms for *himself*, rather than through our agency or intervention' (emphasis in original).

³⁸ See Broughton Papers, IOR MSS.Eur. F.213.

³⁹ Burnes frequently mentions the *Lohani* merchants in his *Travels... Vol III*. See for example p. 332-7 when Burnes advises British engagement with the Lohanis for commercial purposes.

in chapter two, Masson frequently embedded himself in the *kafilas* (caravans) of regional tradesmen, an experience that not only increased his insight into local tax-collecting practices, but also indicated how revenue was a tool by which local chiefs could influence their populations, and maintain their standing. On his second trip to Kabul, Burnes remarked on the commercial advantages that the city derived from its geographical location at the confluence of various market routes. For the British this served further benefits as Burnes also noted: 'Its political advantages though in a degree inferior to its commercial ones, are enhanced by them, since Cabool has rapid and regular communication with the countries adjacent, and is supplied, at the same time, with accurate information of what passes in them'.⁴⁰

To British policy-makers, trade was not simply a local form of power management, but a defining feature of the order they propounded. Governor-General Lord Auckland was keen to impress this on Dost Muhammad Khan in his initial communications with him. Writing in advance of the arrival of Burnes in May 1837, he insisted that 'to your enlightened mind it cannot fail to be obvious that commerce is the basis of all natural prosperity and that it is commerce alone which enables the people of one country to exchange its superfluous commodities for those of another, to accumulate wealth and to enjoy all the comforts and blessings of civilized life.' The diffusion of these 'blessings and comforts' was, he claimed, 'the grand object of the British Government'.⁴¹ On his way up the Indus for a second time Burnes' activities were clearly circumscribed in commercial terms.⁴² Joining him on this trip were his colleagues Dr Lord, and Lt Leech. The Burnes mission was ostensibly a surveying mission in the best traditions of the empiricist

⁴⁰ IOR/V/27/270, No.IV, 'On the Political State of Cabool', 26 November 1837, p. 14.

⁴¹ IOR/F/4/1680/67026, Letter from Lord Auckland to The Ameer Dost Mahomed Khan, p. 147-8.

⁴² As Captain Wade described it, '[t]he mission is declared to be strictly of a commercial character, and the object of it is to collect commercial information, and to make known to the merchants residing beyond the Indus the measures which have been adopted with a view to re-establishing the trade by that river.' Masson, *Narrative*, III, 405-6. Citing a letter from Wade to Masson dated 30th September 1836, copies of which can be found in the Masson Papers, MSS. Eur. E. 161, Correspondence II.

methods of the enlightenment. Therefore, the data contained within these reports was of a highly categorical, and often quantitative nature.⁴³

The plan for the mission was to explore the opportunity for the establishing of a convenient position on the Indus for a trade '*entrepôt*' and 'annual fair'.⁴⁴ It was envisaged, that the benefits of such a trading post would emanate along the networks of trade that worked their way up the Indus, through the Bolan and Khyber passes, to Kabul and beyond. This was a project that would not only serve to increase British influence in the region, but would draw trade away from similar Russian trade fairs in the Khanates of the north. The tone of the political, geographical, and commercial sections of the Burnes mission reports were therefore infused with the 'language of trade'. As Hopkins puts it, this language 'served as more than simply a medium of political rhetoric. Instead, trade was the idiom of British governmentality for this generation. British philosophies of governance considered trade, or rather the creation of an environment conducive to free trade, as one of the central areas of sovereign competence.'⁴⁵

This language shaped the observations that the British made of the space they encountered. Burnes provides a perfect example in his description of Kabul:

As a city, Cabool owes more importance to its position, which is central for commerce, than being the seat of a Government, and it has therefore stemmed with success the various revolutions which have disturbed the general peace of this country. Invigorated as it is by this independence, there are few positions in the East better adapted for a metropolis. Its political advantages, though in a degree inferior to its commercial ones, are enhanced by them, since Cabool has a rapid and regular communication with the countries adjacent, and is supplied, at the same time, with accurate information of what passes in them, and with the abundant resources of foreign lands.

⁴³ As they appear in the India Office Library, the records of the Burnes mission are divided into three sections: Political, Geographical, and Commercial. See IOR/V/27/270.

⁴⁴ Masson, *Narrative*, III, 405.

⁴⁵ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, 38.

The British were beginning to see the regional trade routes as a new political geography, a projection of their commercial ambitions that drowned out the ground realities of competing chiefships and a region that was continually beset by the actions of raiding Sikh forces. Trade was a 'grand panacea'⁴⁶ not only to this instability, but cognitively provided a more comfortable language for colonial officials bewildered by the complexities of the Indus and the states to the west of it. The emergence of this political geography was based in part on the data that the commercial mission spurned. The demand for information on which the viability of the commercial mission depended prompted the collection of a wealth of information that betrayed an illusion of understanding. As they travelled up the Indus, Burnes, Lord, and Leech fastidiously recorded population figures, chiefship structures, revenue yields, geographical features (including water supplies), crossing points, and distance charts. They also charted the course of the river, noting the navigable channels at shallow parts, and providing detailed sketches of improvised crossing points. They also noted the land routes into Afghanistan.

The nature of this information has led many to speculate that the Burnes mission was a military intelligence gathering exercise all along. Metcalfe had already objected to the first commercial mission undertaken by Burnes on the grounds that it was unduly provocative.⁴⁷ The second mission appeared to confirm this. Moreover, it was feared in some quarters that such a mission would inevitably lead to a *political* mission, and therefore undermine the concept of non-intervention that persisted particularly amongst East India Company officials.⁴⁸ Masson was unequivocal in his opinion after the event, writing of the commercial mission in derisory terms. 'The main and great aim of government, is declared to be to open the Indus. Was the Indus ever closed,

⁴⁶ The words of Richard Cobden, the British Libertarian and politician. Norris, *The First Afghan War*, 38.

⁴⁷ 'It is a trick, in my opinion', he wrote, 'unworthy of our government, which cannot fail, when detected, as most probably it will be, to excite the jealousy and indignation of the powers on whom we play it ... It is not impossible that it will lead to war.' Norris, *The First Afghan War*, 45.

⁴⁸ Henry St George Tucker, who was Chairman of the Company Board at the time, shared this view. He declined to support the appointment of Burnes 'feeling perfectly assured that it must soon degenerate into a political agency, and that we should as a necessary consequence be involved in all the entanglement of Afghan politics.' Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan*, Vol. I, 181.

or further closed than by its dangerous entrances and shallow depth of water?’⁴⁹ Masson further mocked the ‘absurdity’ of commercial treaties with states whose history was built on trade.⁵⁰

Given the more pressing matter at this time of the activities of the Sikh army, it is surprising that Burnes’ mission has not been more readily interpreted as an information gathering exercise on Ranjit Singh, rather than a spying mission to Afghanistan.⁵¹ In addition, the idea that this was a military intelligence mission from the outset seem hard to square with the impression Burnes had himself of the purpose of his mission,⁵² not least the reluctance that met his suggestion that he should pursue political purposes alongside his commercial investigations. At most Burnes was given tacit approval for broadening the scope of his mission. When he reached Kabul he was vocal to Masson and later Elphinstone in his fears that his mission was unduly restricted to purely commercial matters. Burnes felt that an opportunity was being missed for political influence. In fact, ‘political’ influence was at this time granted in his instructions to explore the possibility of reaching an Afghan-Sikh agreement over Peshawar (this is dealt with in detail later), but it was circumscribed beyond this role. The most we can say for the political intelligence that he provided at this time therefore, was that it was useful for an as-yet undefined policy course. It is certainly convenient that much of the data provided by these men would be useful for military purposes, but it is information that would need to have been obtained if either commercial or military endeavours were to be pursued.

The important fact remains, however, that as an information form, commercial data fuelled the idea that the British were gaining knowledge of

⁴⁹ Masson *Narrative*, III, 432.

⁵⁰ As he put it, ‘[f]rom ancient and prescribed usage, moderate and fixed duties are levied; trade is perfectly free; no goods are prohibited; and the more extensive the commerce carried on the greater advantage to the state. Where, then, the benefit of commercial treaties?’ Masson, *Narrative*, III, 432.

⁵¹ Add Ms 36473, Auckland to Hobhouse, 26 August 1836, p.80. Writing to Hobhouse of his plans to send Burnes up the Indus Auckland wrote ‘I am not sorry to have an opportunity of letting Runjeet Singh know that we are alive to all his movements. He is very much disposed to be active and warlike against every neighbor [*sic*] except British India and has much extended his territories towards Cabul and is threatening to do the same towards Sinde’.

⁵² MSS. Eur. E. 161 Correspondence, III, 3, ff. 23, Enclosure 4, Burnes to McNeil, 6 June 1837.

the region. It was in many ways a precursor to the later genealogical trees and tribal leader matrices that would guide the understandings of frontier officers in the late nineteenth century. Such data provided information, but not knowledge. The more important contextual factors pertaining to the style of rule, or the significance of tribute, for example, were elided by this empiricist quest. It was yet another dimension in which Afghanistan was becoming rendered intelligible to the British, and therefore manageable as a policy problem.

Prelude to an Intervention: Shah Shuja and the 1834 Expedition

The British decision to launch a military intervention into Afghanistan was in essence a policy of regime change. Accordingly, a key plank of this policy rested on deciding whom to back. The stark choice was continuing to back Dost Muhammad Khan, or choosing instead to return Shah Shuja to his throne. As the previous chapter showed, the British were far from unfamiliar with Shah Shuja, who had received Elphinstone's embassy in 1809 and following his fall from power had spent much of his time in exile under a British pension. But as Afghanistan became a higher priority throughout the 1830s, Shah Shuja was able to take advantage of a propitious moment to re-stake his claim to the rulership. During this time British policy makers were able to familiarize themselves once more with Shuja as a potential monarch. As he pressed his claim successfully, Shuja would carry out a campaign to reclaim Kandahar, with a view to using it as a springboard to Kabul. The response of Dost Muhammad Khan would give the British a glimpse into the political and military power of their Afghan neighbour. As such, this was a formative experience for the British.

Shah Shuja's exile had begun in 1809 with his defeat at the hands of Fittih Khan, who installed Mahmud Shah on the throne in his stead. What followed was a humiliating period of exile for Shuja, who had lost his crown, his *Vizier*, and a majority of his kingly jewels in the hasty retreat from the battle of

Nimla.⁵³ Having fled through the Khyber Pass, and an unsuccessful retaliatory campaign via Kandahar⁵⁴ he headed to Kashmir where he was imprisoned by Ata Mahommed Khan, the son of his former *Vizier*. He was then imprisoned in a jail in Attock where his captors attempted to extract information relating to the famous *Koh-i-noor* (mountain of light) diamond that he had previously owned. Escaping from Attock, Shuja and his family then fell under the capture of Runjit Singh who took on the quest for the diamond, which was eventually traded by Shah Shuja's wife for his release.⁵⁵ Shuja had a brief role in Muhammad Azim Khan's own campaign to take the throne in 1819 but it was not until the 1830s that his efforts met with any level of success. Accordingly, there was a degree of sympathy for the monarch amongst British observers.

In late 1831, the Secretary to Governor-General Bentinck heard through Political Agent Captain Wade of a plan being hatched by Shuja to reclaim his throne. In May of 1832 further details emerged: Shuja was seeking the backing of 'friends' in his expedition claiming that 'the people, not only of Affghanistan, but Khorassan and Toorkistan, are in his favour'.⁵⁶ In a letter written to Shuja's Agent with Claude Wade, the former king played on the partial ignorance of the British announcing: 'The conquest of my country is an affair of easy attainment. To make a movement, however, pecuniary means, both for present and future use, are absolutely necessary'.⁵⁷ Shuja hoped to combine the backing of the Sind Amirs with that of the British. In order to pay his followers and to justify his request he claimed support not just within Afghanistan but in the surrounding region as well: 'The people of Sinde, Belochistan, and Seistan to the confines of the ocean are well inclined towards me', he said. 'They wear the symbol of submission, and their country is mine.'⁵⁸ Internally, the Barakzais, he suggested, were 'not the people around whom the Affghans will rally'. 'Even now', he claimed, 'they consider

⁵³ Nimla is between Kabul and Jalalabad. Burnes, *Travels*, III, 236.

⁵⁴ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 236.

⁵⁵ Burnes, *Travels*, III, 243-5; Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 368.

⁵⁶ IOR/L/PS/20/MEMO1/15, No.3, Wade to Macnaghten, Simla, 11 May 1832, p. 4.

⁵⁷ L/PS/20/MEMO1/15, No.3, Shah-Shooja-ool-Moolk to Kazee Moolah Mahomed Hossein, p. 5.

⁵⁸ L/PS/20/MEMO1/15, No.3, Shah-Shooja-ool-Moolk to Kazee Moolah Mahomed Hossein, p. 5.

the preservation of their authority within the streets and bazaars of Cabool and Candahar, a blessing.’⁵⁹

In order to make his case, Shuja drew on a rumour that the Persian Prince Abbas Mirza was seeking to expand his rule ‘throughout Khorassan’ and that an envoy of his had arrived at Kandahar. But Bentinck remained unruffled. Wade was instructed to inform Shuja’s agent that ‘he must keep himself clear from all connexion [sic] either ostensible or real, with the different political parties which exist in this country, confining his attention strictly to communicating to you the news of passing events.’⁶⁰ Concerning the reported threat of Abbas Mirza he replied directly to Shah Shuja, noting that “[t]he conflicting nature of the reports circulated by individuals regarding the politics of Kharassan [sic], as connected with the movement of the Persian army, must convince your Majesty that no reliance can be placed on the accuracy of rumours proceeding from sources such as those from which your information has apparently been derived.’⁶¹

The subtext to this message hints at a general aversion on the part of the British towards ‘native’ informants, whom they considered inherently inferior as information sources. But a wider concern, particularly for Bentinck was the presentation of a non-interventionist policy with respect to Afghan affairs. Despite the high moral tone exhibited by the British over non-interference, the advance that Shah Shuja had requested on his ‘pension’ was eventually granted. In 1833, Shah Shuja struck out for the Bolan Pass, and Kandahar, from which he planned to launch his assault on Kabul. For Claude Wade, at least, Shuja was certainly a contender for power, ‘[t]he Barukzyes of Candahar are the weakest, and least enterprising members of their family in possession of power; the Shah seems sanguine of success’, he wrote.⁶² Whilst the British stuck to their ostensibly non-interventionist policy, and projected this stance to Ranjit Singh, they had also sent an army officer, Major Faithful,

⁵⁹ L/PS/20/MEM01/15, No.3, Shah-Shooja-ool-Moolk to Kazee Moolah Mahomed Hossein, p. 5.

⁶⁰ L/PS/20/MEM01/15, No.3, Macnaghten to Wade, Simla, 16 May 1832, p. 5-6.

⁶¹ L/PS/20/MEM01/15, No.9, Lord William Bentinck to Shah Shooja-ool-Moolk, p. 8.

⁶² L/PS/20/MEM01/15, No.11, Wade to Macnaghten, 11 November 1832, p. 9.

to report on the progress of the expedition. It is unclear for how long the Major stayed with the party but the progress of the mission provides an interesting case study in the viability of the British information system at this time.

The British kept a close eye on Shuja's campaign. In June 1833, Wade reported on information received from Ranjit Singh's newswriter in Kabul that suggested that 'Shah Shooja's approach had raised the people in that part of the country in his favour, and that several of the neighbouring chiefs had already thrown off their allegiance to Dost Mahomed Khan'.⁶³ These 'neighbouring chiefs' included his representative in Bamiyan, Haji Khan, whose relationship with Dost Muhammad was already beset by mutual mistrust following Haji Khan's efforts to undermine his authority through engaging with the Shi'a community in Kabul. Haji Khan had also engaged with Mir Yezdanbaksh, ruler of the Bisut territory to the west of Kabul, and one of the Dost's principal rivals.⁶⁴ By February 1834, Shuja had only made it as far as Shikarpur, where he had reneged on an agreement to rendezvous with Sindian troops who were to support his march on Kandahar, and instead opted to seize control of the city and seek to extort further financial backing from the Sind Amirs.⁶⁵ Meanwhile in Kabul Dost Muhammad Khan had opted not to meet Shuja's advance in Kandahar, and instead marched his troops to Jalalabad to shore up his vulnerable eastern territories. Noting that the winter snows had now cut Dost Muhammad off from communications with Kandahar, Wade watched these events with a degree of optimism, predicting that '[i]n the event of a reverse of fortune befalling the Sirdar of Cabool, the probability is, that he will not be able to retain his authority in that city.'⁶⁶ By May, rumours were already circling suggesting that Shuja had captured

⁶³ L/PS/20/MEM01/15, No.3/28, Wade to Macnaghten, 9 June 1833, p. 17.

⁶⁴ Masson documents the course of this particular political struggle in Masson, *Narrative*, II, 300-18. His suggestion that Haji Khan was positioning himself for an alliance with Shah Shuja comes on p. 322. This suspicion arose in part from a trip that Masson took with Haji Khan to the Bamiyan idols, Masson, *Narrative*, II, 374-5.

⁶⁵ L/PS/20/MEM01/15, No.3/35, Wade to Macnaghten, 1 February 1834.

⁶⁶ L/PS/20/MEM01/15, No.3/35, Wade to Macnaghten, 1 February 1834.

Kandahar and that the Barakzai Sirdars were making 'overtures' through the mother of Dost Muhammad Khan.⁶⁷

In the background to these military ventures lay a growing structure of treaty agreement overseen by the British. Prior to setting off for Kandahar, Shah Shuja had reached an agreement with Ranjit Singh, in advance of his expected victory over the Barakzais. This was a negotiation that continued as Shuja carried out his campaign, but the terms of the draft treaty are instructive. The treaty imposed hefty restrictions on the territorial claims that would be accorded to Shah Shuja, stipulating 'That the Shah shall disclaim, both for himself, his successors, and all the tribe of Suddozye, every right and title to the countries which have been acquired by his Highness, his dependents, and tributaries of every kind', this included Peshawar, and the revenues that derived from these territories.⁶⁸ The treaty also bound the two parties together in terms of tribute from Shah Shuja to Ranjit Singh,⁶⁹ and formalised the Barakzai-Saddozai feud by stipulating that 'whatever property in money, jewels, or cannon, be taken from the Barukzyes in Cabool, Peshawur, and Jelalabad, shall be divided equally by his Highness and the Shah', an article that was described as 'right and proper' by Shuja himself.⁷⁰

The significance of the treaty negotiation was not lost on Wade, who noted the 'greatest benefit' to be derived from the treaty itself in terms of British interests was Shah Shuja 'having formally renounced, on the part of himself, his heirs, successors, and the whole race of Suddozyes, all right and title to such tracts of country, lying on both banks of the Indus, as have been wrested

⁶⁷ L/PS/20/MEMO1/15, No.3/43, Mackeson to Wade, Mitthunkote, 28 May, 1834, p. 24.

⁶⁸ The full list of territories is as follows: 'Cohaut, Heshtrugheo, Isezie, Khyber, Cashmere, Mooltan, Menkera, Kolebagh, Bootchee, Serai, Tenouls, territories farmed by Bahawulpore, the two Ketchees north of the Sutledge, Tonk, Sengher, Gerang, Fort of Rolien, Gooldhurree, Akora, territory of Khittek, the seat of Preadah Khan's family; Derhend, Tebelah, and Preadah Khan's places of abode.' L/PS/20/MEMO1/15, No.3/2, 'Propositions of the Maharajah Runjit Singh...', p. 2.

⁶⁹ The treaty noted that 'the Maharajah's passion for horses is well known, and the Shah shall send him 102 horses of the finest description, every year, 25 Persian mules, 11 Persian swords, and 200 maunds of fruit...', L/PS/20/MEMO1/15, No.3/2, 'Propositions of the Maharajah Runjit Singh...', p. 2.

⁷⁰ L/PS/20/MEMO1/15, No.3/2, 'Propositions of the Maharajah Runjit Singh...', 2; No.3/3, 'Note of Kazeer Mahomed Hossein on the part of the Shah', 3.

by the Sikhs from the Affghans, since the dissolution of the Kingdom of Cabool'. In short, the treaty agreements emerging from Shuja's campaign were providing the foundations for a resolution of the Peshawar question. A question that would soon be exacerbated by Sikh actions.

Despite this oversight, the British stuck to their self-appointed status as neutral observers. When the British 'name' was utilised by the negotiating parties over the status of Shikarpur, Wade was quick to advise Macnaghten that he felt it necessary to point out 'to both parties, that it is not consistent with the law of nations, to use the name of a third party in such engagements, without previously consulting it.'⁷¹ Macnaghten swiftly followed up on this advice. This quasi-legalistic process demonstrates the importance that the British bestowed upon treaty negotiations. In being shut out from this diplomatic exchange, Dost Muhammad Khan was unwittingly being placed beyond the pale of diplomatic negotiation. In the process he was slowly losing any claim he might have harboured over the lost territory of Peshawar. The symbolic power of the treaty notwithstanding, the legacy of this agreement was that it would provide the grounds for a later agreement signed between Shah Shuja and Ranjit Singh in 1838. The reference to 'laws among nations' was in this sense somewhat hypocritical coming from the British, who had just overseen the negotiating away of a part of Afghan territory that was still contested between the primary parties.

Ultimately however, the validity of the treaty would be determined by events beyond the control of the British, and these events were increasingly blurred. Basing their information primarily on rumour, numerous reports filtered down from Kandahar and Kabul throughout the summer of 1834. Initially these favoured Shuja who had reportedly achieved such an emphatic victory at Kandahar that Dost Muhammad Khan had allegedly committed suicide by drinking poison. Although this was subsequently rejected as unlikely, reports of him hoarding his revenues and fleeing were taken more seriously. Plans for a negotiation between the Dost and Shuja were offered as an explanation

⁷¹ L/PS/20/MEM01/15, No.3/46, Wade to Macnaghten, Ludhiana, 17 June 1834.

for the now apparent failure of Shuja to take Kandahar. By June, a siege of that city was underway.⁷²

Faced with this uncertainty the British showed a tendency to err on the side of who they knew best. In one report between Wade and Macnaghten, faced with ambiguity as to the exact progress of Shah Shuja in the siege of Kandahar, Wade reported, '[t]he Simple Affghans, untutored in the modern art of war, considered ... reluctance to close with them a proof [of] timidity and weakness, while those who can appreciate the subject, see in such a course that Shah Shooja-ool-Moolk has not been an inattentive observer of the system of strategy that prevails in our army, and that as far as his imperfect means will allow, he is applying it with perseverance in his present contest with his enemies.'⁷³

By late July however, rumours began to circulate over the defeat of Shah Shuja. Confusion, it appeared, reigned in all quarters. On 25 July it was reported that the astronomers of Lahore had been directed by the Maharajah 'to consult the stars, and ascertain which of the belligerent parties in Affghanistan was victorious.' This too was inconclusive, '[t]he astronomers were of different opinions; some said that Shah Shooja had gained a victory, while others represented that he had been defeated.'⁷⁴ By 13 August, the defeat of Shuja was confirmed.

Whilst the 1834 Shuja expedition provides a case study in the opacity of the British information network at this time, it also serves also as a reminder of the impact that this confusion had on perceptions of the internal dynamics within Afghanistan at the time. The swirling currents of rumour, counter-rumour, and information presented an Afghan state that was dangerously volatile, potentially with regional implications. On 25 September Wade reported to Macnaghten the following:

⁷² L/PS/20/MEM01/15, No.3/40, Pottinger to C.E. Trevelyn, 5 June 1834, p. 23.

⁷³ L/PS/20/MEM01/15, No.3/45, Wade to Macnaghten, 17 June 1834, p. 25.

⁷⁴ L/PS/20/MEM01/15, No.3/51, Abstract of Intelligence from Lahore, from 25 to 31 July 1834, p. 36.

‘Dost Mahomed Khan is said to be making great exertions. He has raised the whole of the Mahomedan population of the neighbouring countries to join him, by preaching a holy war; and means to attack the Sikhs in three divisions ... On Runjeet Sing’s part great preparations are also making to give the Affghans a warm reception. His Highness has at present 25,000 men at and near Peshawur and is assembling the whole of his remaining disposable troops ... Many well-informed persons are of [the] opinion that the fate of Affghanistan depends on the issue of the approaching contest, which must either confirm or destroy the power of the Sikhs in that country. Runjeet Sing is determined not to let go his hold on Peshawur, while Dost Mahomed Khan and the other Affghan rulers are equally resolved to stake their political existence on the recapture of that place.’⁷⁵

As this passage demonstrates, the motivations for these rumoured violent outbursts was multiple. It was unclear whether the Afghan political community was defending itself against a disenfranchised former monarch and his rag-tag gang of local mercenaries, or whether the polity was coalescing under the single banner of Islam to fight a seminal battle asserting Afghan territory, sovereignty and survival. The episode provides a case study in the weakness of the British and Sikh intelligence apparatus at this time. In the absence of definitive facts, the British were forced to rely on assumptions that invariably led to panic, and worst-case-scenario prophesies.

The Ascendancy of Dost Muhammad Khan

Following his defeat in the field, Shuja limped back to Ludhiana, and to British protection. His expected arrival at the Bombay Presidency of the East India Company prompted the Governor-General to inquire as to the nature of reception to be accorded to the ex-King. The reply was instructive. The Court of Directors suggested ‘that he should be treated ... with all the personal attention which was due to an unfortunate Prince; but that his visit ought not to be distinguished by any public mark of honour, which might lead to the

⁷⁵ L/PS/20/MEM01/15, No.3/54, Wade to Macnaghten, 25 September 1834, p. 39

supposition that his recent proceedings had received the countenance and support of the British Government.⁷⁶

Meanwhile, the defeat of Shah Shuja boosted Dost Muhammad Khan's own claim to royal authority and presented an opportunity for him to consolidate the foundations of his rule. On his rise to preeminence in Kabul in 1826 Dost Muhammad Khan had made no formal claims to Royal Authority. His defeat over Shah Shuja, however, had cast him as the defender of the new Barakzai-led political order in Kabul. In addition, having dealt with the threat posed by Shah Shuja, he turned his attentions to reclaiming the land lost to the Sikhs in the recent skirmishes. Seeking to shift the foundations of his claims to Royal Authority away from lineage structures, and Saddozai descent, Dost Muhammad Khan sought to raise support for this clash through the motivating call of Islam.

In 1835, Dost Muhammad assumed the title of *amir al-mu'minin*, 'commander of the faithful', thereby providing the justification for a call to *Jihad* against the 'infidel' Sikhs, and complying with Islamic doctrine which stated that martyrdom could only be attained under a lawful king. Christine Noelle notes two further significant features of the coronation. Firstly, there was the choice of the title 'Amir' which gave royal authority and religious legitimacy to his reign. The coronation included the 'typical expressions of royal authority': the striking of coins and reading of the *khutba* in his name - a marker of royal authority as described by Elphinstone. Meanwhile the title 'Amir' distinguished him from the previous Saddozai rulers who adopted the Persian title 'Shah'. Secondly, Noelle notes the similarities between the Dost's coronation and that of the first Durrani *Padshah* Ahmad Shah. Although the coronation itself was a muted affair, the ceremonial placing of a blade of grass in the turban of the newly crowned Amir in homage to Ahmad Shah's coronation was re-enacted later on amongst a council of relatives and tribal chiefs. As Noelle argues, '[b]y modelling his coronation on Ahmad Shah's nomination Dost Muhammad attempted to refocus public attention from the

⁷⁶ L/PS/20/MEM01/15, No.3/61, The Governor-general of India in Council to the Secret Committee of the Court of Directors of the East India Company, 5 March 1835, p. 43.

recent demise of Saddozai rule to the beginnings of Afghan statehood when all Pashtun leaders had operated on an equal footing.’⁷⁷

This symbolic leadership role was matched by a more consolidated system of government through his own progeny which was bolstered by an increase in revenue. This consolidation was in part the result of the way the Dost had responded to Shah Shuja’s campaign. On hearing of Shuja’s approach in September 1833, Meher Dil Khan, one of the Kandahar chiefs arrived in Kabul requesting military assistance to avert the threat, but Dost Muhammad suspected a plot to entice him away from Kabul and thus allow the chiefs of Peshawar and Jalalabad to take advantage. Rather than sending troops straight to Kandahar he sent them eastward forcing the submission of Jagdalak. Meanwhile, his sons Muhammad Akbar Khan and Muhammad Akram Khan were sent to take Jalalabad.

Through this pre-emptive move Dost Muhammad had thereby gained control of the key province of Jalalabad, the revenue from which now increased from 400,000 to 465,000 rupees.⁷⁸ By 1837, Dost Muhammad held much of eastern Afghanistan through his sons: Muhammad Afzal Khan in Zurmat district east of Ghazni; Muhammad Akbar Khan in Jalalabad and Laghman; Azam Khan in Bamiyan and Bisut; Ghulam Haidar Khan in Ghazni; and Shams al-Din Khan in Kohistan north of Kabul. Having extracted only 500,000 rupees from Kabul and Kohistan during the early years of his reign, by the late 1830s Dost Muhammad Khan’s revenue was estimated at between 2,400,000-2,600,000 rupees.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Noelle, *State and Tribe*, 15-16.

⁷⁸ Encompassing the Jagdalak pass in the west to the town of Dakka in Mohmand territory as well as the Tajik villages of Laghman. Noelle, *State and Tribe*, 37.

⁷⁹ Noelle, *State and Tribe*, 38.

The impact of Dost Muhammad's rulership on the state of the Afghan polity was not lost on the British. When Burnes arrived in Kabul in 1837 his reports on the government of Dost Muhammad emphasized the improvements he had made in consolidating his rule, but Burnes warned that this had come at an 'expensive price' in terms of his share in the good will of his subjects, and of the merchant classes.⁸⁰ In Burnes' eyes, the Dost was risking the fiscal stability of his state through the costs of his bloated military, which had forced an increase in taxes and revenues, the seizure of lands, and a lapse in the *jagirs* of key allies including Haji Khan.⁸¹ In addition, arbitrary loans and fines, as well as a reduction in the allowances afforded to his court members put a potential strain on his authority.⁸² Despite such imbalances Burnes conceded that this more predatory form of centralized authority had only been possible through a greater oversight of his administrative structures. This included the customs house in Kabul which were no longer 'farmed', and now came under the direct management of the Chief. Meanwhile, instabilities in Kandahar and Herat were funneling trade through Kabul helping to push up the revenue.⁸³

These observations were to an extent determined by the task that Burnes had been set of exploring commercial prospects, yet his analysis went beyond topics of trade. In his discussion of the 'factions of the state' we also see Burnes deploying an ardently Elphinstonian concept to the Afghan political scene. 'The system of government among the Affghans' he wrote, 'is too well known to require a recapitulation from me. The republican genius which marks it, is unchanged, and whatever power a Sudozye or Barukzye may acquire, its preservation can only be ensured by not infringing the rights of the tribes'. The Dost, he argued, had followed this tradition of non-intervention in tribal affairs.

⁸⁰ IOR/V/27/270/7, No.IV 'On the Political State of Cabool', 26 November 1837, p. 18.

⁸¹ A key ally of Dost Muhammad Khan, who had overseen the consolidation of territories to the west of Kabul, and whom Masson travelled to Bamiyan with during his time in Kabul.

⁸² IOR/V/27/270/7, No.IV 'On the Political State of Cabool', 26 November 1837, p. 18.

⁸³ IOR/V/27/270/7, No.IV 'On the Political State of Cabool', 26 November 1837, p. 20.

But Burnes also took the Elphinstone episteme further in two significant ways. Firstly, he ascribed to them the aura of ruling legitimacy pointing out that the Barakzai 'though inferior in rank to [the Saddozai] ... is yet one of the most distinguished of the Dooranee tribes'. Noting that in the time of Ahmed Shah, the Zirak tribe from which the Barakzai descended had been split in two for fear of their influence, Burnes added '[t]hey cannot therefore be viewed in the light of a tribe suddenly raised, since, in power and rank, they have long been of importance in the country.'⁸⁴ He further noted the killing of Wazir Fittih Khan, in the traditional heroic fashion as related to Masson, thereby bolstering the Barakzai claim to honourable vengeance for the killing of their 'brother ... who had never injured the man who caused his murder, but devoted himself to the consolidation of his power'.⁸⁵ By giving the history and lineage of the Barakzai clan, Burnes was engaging in his own private historicism, lending them credibility as rulers in the eyes of his readers, and in the eyes of Afghans.

Secondly, Burnes converted Elphinstone's tribal taxonomy into an understanding of the political ecology of Afghanistan. The Barakzai were thus contrasted with the Ghilzai who at the time occupied the space from Kandahar to Gandamak and half way to Peshawar. Having failed to reclaim power since their ejection by Nadir Shah, the Ghilzai were now subsumed under the Barakzai, in part by intermarriage, with both Dost Muhammad and his son Muhammad Akbar Khan having married into the tribe as well. Meanwhile, the western tribes were parceled under the affairs of Kandahar. As such, Burnes created the impression that units comprising Elphinstone's tribal taxonomy could be compared to competing city-states. This conceptualization neglected the mechanisms for co-dependence and dispute resolution that Elphinstone referred to elsewhere in his work, and was further evidence of the 'tribalization' of the Afghan political community.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ IOR/V/27/270/7, No.IV 'On the Political State of Cabool', 26 November 1837, p. 20-1.

⁸⁵ IOR/V/27/270/7, No.IV 'On the Political State of Cabool', 26 November 1837, p. 21.

⁸⁶ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*.

Policy and Territory: Imagining Afghanistan as a Territorial Unit

As the previous chapter showed, the 'where' question over Afghanistan's identity as a territorial unit had long occupied observers. As policy options became more closely considered, the success of British strategy increasingly relied on an adequate understanding of how Afghanistan was formed, and this required an agreed-upon definition of its territorial status. The Arrowsmith Map which appeared in Burnes' account is instructive in the ways in which British policy makers territorially dissected the region at this time (see Appendix 6).

In many ways the British were being forced to imagine an Afghan territorial entity before it could be said to meaningfully exist. At the metropole this was a function of policy. In the words of Lord Ellenborough, Chair of the Secret Committee, to the Governor-General in 1835: 'It is our political interest that the Indus and its tributary streams should not belong to one state. The division of power on the Indus between the Scindians, the Affghans, and the Sikhs is probably the arrangement most calculated to secure us against hostile use of that river, while it will not probably oppose any real obstacles to the navigation of that river for commercial purposes, which should be secured by treaty'. To this end, a united Afghan state would serve British interests, for 'valuing and capable of maintaining its independence, having more to fear than to hope from foreign aid, it would serve our purpose by making Affghanistan an impassable obstacle to any power advancing from the West'.⁸⁷

This was a clear elaboration of the buffer-state concept, familiar to much of the literature on the great game. But what this meant for British knowledge acquisition was equally important, as Ellenborough went on to demonstrate, '[i]t must, therefore, at all times, be a subject of much moment to us to have an accurate knowledge of all that passes in Affghanistan, with a view to our

⁸⁷ Norris, *The First Afghan War*, 71.

taking promptly such measures as may seem, from time to time, to be dictated by our interests' . Whilst 'all that passes in Affghanistan', was presumed to have meant Russian intrigue - and to an extent this was the focus in London - this overlooks the archival material on internal political dynamics, and the changing fortunes of Afghanistan's rulers that were also recounted at this time. This aspect of the knowledge imperative receives less attention, despite the fact that it was also sent directly to the Governor-General.

In India, perceptions of Afghanistan's political community took on a far more fragmented character, partly as a result of this more granular perspective. The problem for policy-makers in India and particularly the 'politicals' on the ground was that Afghanistan's territorial form was wrapped in ambiguity. A key distinction in British thinking on this topic was accordingly whether Afghanistan should be considered as a unitary polity, or more accurately as a collection of independent chiefships. Whilst Elphinstone had hinted at the possibility of a unified territorial concept, loosely under the authority of the Saddozai dynasty, his successors looked in vain for the legacy of this coherent entity. Faced instead with territorial ambiguity, an accepted method of creating a degree of legibility for the British was to view the country in terms of its major population centres, namely Kabul, Peshawar, Kandahar, and Herat. As military operations became increasingly likely during the summer of 1838, Herat became the linchpin of this city-based lexicon.

HERAT

In late 1837, Shah Mahmud, the Persian ruler, marched on Herat for the second time that year, besieging the city and alarming the British.⁸⁸ With the British envoy at Tehran, John McNeill, an ardent Russophobe, the only information source that the British felt they could rely on for news from this

⁸⁸ The first attempt had ended before troops had reached Herat apparently due to insufficient funds, although McNeill had indicated British disapproval of the scheme to the Shah. See MSS. Eur. E. 161 Correspondence, III, 3, ff. 23, Enclosure 1, Macnaghten to McNeill, 10 April 1837.

part of the region was warped towards the playing up of this particular threat narrative. This narrative had a precedent as well. McNeill's predecessor, Henry Ellis had warned London back in November 1835 of the Shah's 'very extended schemes of conquest in the direction of Afghanistan',⁸⁹ a warning that was backed up only two months later by a memo referring to Russia. Palmerston and Bentinck, the then Governor-General, shared such fears and both had pondered the military utility of Herat as a staging post for Russian military moves.⁹⁰

The Russophobic view was certainly more popular in London than Calcutta, a reflection perhaps of the direct line of communication from Tehran to London through Constantinople. Whilst in post, McNeill reported directly to the Foreign Secretary and the President of the Board of Control. In Calcutta however, Auckland's view had been more measured. Reporting on Ellis's dispatches in 1836 he reported 'Mr Ellis is far more apprehensive than I am of Persian invasions of Herat and of Russian influence in that quarter. Sure I am that nothing but the offence and jealousy of other powers would be the result of an ostensible alliance with Dost Mahomed'.⁹¹ 'In direct aggression', he wrote elsewhere, 'I hold [Persia] to be actually powerless, and in indirect [aggression] she can only become formidable under an exaggerated opinion of her power. In the meantime I look for the extension of British power and influence in the direction of the Indus much more to our merchants than our soldiers'.⁹² Viewed from Calcutta, the Sikhs were seen as a far more pressing

⁸⁹ Norris, *The First Afghan War*, 79.

⁹⁰ See Bentinck's "Minute by the Governor-General and Commander-in-Chief, March 13th, 1835", quoted in full in Boulger, Demetrius, C. – Lord William Bentinck (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), 177; 'Memoir on the means of attack by Russia on British India and of the defence to be opposed to it', Broughton Papers IOR MSS Eur F213/89. This second memo was drafted by Lt. General Samuel Ford Whittingham in 1834 and sent to McNeill, Palmerston, Bentinck, and eventually Hobhouse. It outlined the possibility of Russian forces mounting a two-stage campaign first by taking Herat, then using Afghan and Sikh levies as proxies to move on India. Perhaps reflecting the impact of this memo on his own thinking, Bentinck's minute projected a similar campaign by the Russians. It is important to note, however, that both works can be seen in large part as a call for greater resources for the Indian Army. This aspect of reasons behind threat inflation vis-à-vis Russia is often neglected.

⁹¹ Add MS 36473, Auckland to Hobhouse, 28 May 1836, p.54.

⁹² Norris, *The First Afghan War*, 83.

threat in terms of Afghanistan's integrity.⁹³ In addition, there was an underlying ambiguity as to whether Herat should be considered part of Afghan 'territory' at all. The Afghan-Persian border had been a site of contestation between the two monarchies since the beginning of the nineteenth century with Persian Qajar territorial claims bolstered by linguistic and confessional commonalities, namely Shi'ism.⁹⁴ This was an ambiguity that seeped into British consciousness. Conolly's account suggests that Herat was to be viewed as part of 'Persian Khorassaun', and the antipathy between Heratis and Kandaharis ('Afghans') was clear.⁹⁵ As the former envoy to Tehran, Henry Willock pointed out to Lord Palmerston on the eve of the First Afghan War, the 'earnestness' with which Persia was attempting the 'seduction' of Herat was not to be mistaken for Persia's disposal towards Russian interests as the Kings of Persia had long seen Herat as 'an integral part of the Persian Empire'.⁹⁶

There was a normative dimension to the perception of Persian designs on Herat as well. Observers, and Burnes in particular, often alluded to the more coherent structure of Persia's system of rule.⁹⁷ Whilst ultimately this was not seen as strong enough to resist Russian encroachments, it did provide a more stable state that stood in contrast to the perceived anarchy of the Afghan political community.⁹⁸ In addition, the perceived superiority of Persian culture, history, language, and even intelligence, encouraged the view that Persia was a more civilized nation than the 'rude' Afghans, and therefore entitled to push her authority eastwards. By 1837 Anglo-Persian diplomatic intercourse was thus far more developed,⁹⁹ and considered in a more

⁹³ In Auckland's words: 'Runjeet Singh is likely to be at Cabul long before the Shah of Persia'. Add MS 36473, Auckland to Hobhouse, 9 August 1836, p.85-6.

⁹⁴ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation 1804-1946*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); See also Hopkins and Marsden, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*, 30-33.

⁹⁵ Conolly, *Journey to the North of India*.

⁹⁶ MSS Eur F88/105, Willock to Palmerston, 1 December 1838, p.106.

⁹⁷ IOR/V/27/270/7, No.II, 'On the Persian Faction in Cabool', p.8, and No.IV, 'On the Political State of Cabool', p.17.

⁹⁸ I use the term 'state' advisedly here. Whilst the Afghan 'state' is rarely referred to, the Persian state and the states of the Indus, are features of British diplomatic language, in part due to the treaties signed with these powers.

⁹⁹ Anglo-Persian diplomacy included a detachment of English Officers who were sent to train and organize the Persian Army. This detachment included a number of individuals who

favourable light than Anglo-Afghan relations. Indeed, the 1809 and 1814 treaties between Britain and Persia each carried an article prohibiting British intervention in any war between Persia and Afghanistan.¹⁰⁰

By the second attempt of the Shah on Herat in 1837 however, Auckland's position on Persian non-intervention was beginning to shift. Swayed by the Russophobic views of McNeill and two of his closest advisers - John Colvin and William McNaghten - Auckland began to take a more pessimistic view of the consequences of Persian victory at Herat, and increasingly favoured the view of Russian involvement. At this point the 1814 treaty, and particularly the article on non-British involvement in Persian-Afghan conflicts, became considerably more important as Herat was becoming the linchpin on which wider British policy on Afghanistan rested.

A major reason for increased concern derived from the simple lack of information that was being received in Simla about the progress of the siege. If information from Afghanistan was a scarce commodity at this time, news from Herat was practically non-existent. The British had two contacts on the scene, Lieutenant Eldred Pottinger who found himself stranded within the city having being struck down with an illness whilst embarking on travels towards Central Asia; and also Colonel Charles Stoddart, who had been deputed to the Shah's camp by McNeill in Tehran. McNeill and Pottinger were in communication but the dispatches of the latter were infrequent, and in one instance were even intercepted by a Russian advisor embedded in the Shah's camp, who passed the correspondence to the Shah. Meanwhile, Auckland was faced with two-month periods in which he received no official correspondence on Herat whatsoever.¹⁰¹ In his words he was 'playing a game requiring a clear sighted vision in the dark and with [his] hands tied'.¹⁰² The

would later figure prominently in British diplomacy in this part of the world, such as Sir Justin Sheil, who later became envoy in Tehran; Colonel Farrant, who became Charge d'Affaires also at Tehran; Major D'Arcy Todd, who served as envoy to Herat during the First Anglo-Afghan War; and Sir Henry Rawlinson. Ferrier, *Caravan Journeys*, v.

¹⁰⁰ IOL/L/PS/20/MEM01/15, No.1 'Preliminary Treaty with Persia', 12 March 1809, p.3-4. The wording is taken from Article IV in the 1809 treaty (reiterated as Article IX in 1814).

¹⁰¹ IOR Add MS 36473, p.243, 253, 262.

¹⁰² IOR Add MS 36473, Auckland to Hobhouse, 3 June 1838, p.253.

irony was that it was at this time quicker, and more reliable to get news from Tehran to London through Constantinople, than it was from Herat to Simla, despite the latter journey being half the distance. Although Burnes (in Kabul) and Leech (in Kandahar) were in 'constant communication' with McNeill,¹⁰³ the difficulty of traversing the Afghan geography, as well as the British distrust of local information networks, appears to have slowed communication with the Governor-General's summer headquarters in Simla to a snail's pace.¹⁰⁴ The blackout naturally cut both ways. McNeill professed to be in 'utter ignorance of what was going on in Afghanistan' during his time in the Shah's Camp, indeed it transpired that none of the *cossids* (messengers) had reached him in the camp after the first was dispatched from Afghanistan – a period covering six months.¹⁰⁵

Throughout the spring and summer of 1838, Auckland therefore became increasingly concerned at events unfolding on what the British were now considering to be the first line of defence for their Indian territories. Meanwhile Herat provided for the Russophobes a good opportunity to make their points. Russian military advisors in the Shah's camp were easily painted as *agents provocateurs* despite the fact that many of them were either deserters from the Russian forces, mercenaries, or long-time collaborators with the Persian monarchy, one which had long been under the joint supervision of both England and Russian diplomatic missions.

In early May, in an early example of Palmerston's favoured policy of 'gunboat diplomacy', a troop contingent was dispatched to occupy the island of Kharg in the Persian Gulf in order to pressure the Persian Shah to compromise over

¹⁰³ Durand, *The First Afghan War and its Causes*, 53.

¹⁰⁴ In one instance Burnes explained the delay of his correspondence with McNeill on the grounds that he did not trust the couriers so had sent his letters via the Postmaster General in Bombay. In addition to this paranoia, the route between Kandahar and Herat was seen as being particularly treacherous. IOR MSS Eur F213/68, Burnes to McNeill, 20 November 1837; Add MS 36473, Todd, 23 June 1838, p.306.

¹⁰⁵ The news was relayed by Major D'Arcy Todd, who was dispatched from Herat by McNeill charged with messages for the Governor-General, who was at the time in Simla. He noted that the 'disturbed and disorganized state of the country nominally under Kamran's rule' had slowed his progress. Add MS 36473, Todd, 23 June 1838, p.306-7.

the siege. Both in London and Calcutta, all eyes were now on the outcome of the siege.

KANDAHAR

The position of Kandahar on the route from Herat increased the anxiety over the outcome of the siege. On Burnes' arrival in Kabul in 1837 he had deputed one of his party, Lieutenant Robert Leech to report on the Barakzai brothers' government in Kandahar. The reports of Leech cemented the long-held British view of the Kandahar 'Sirdars' as incompetent and despotic rulers.¹⁰⁶ 'Possessing no right to rule than that of fortune and the sword, they have no affection for their country or subjects', wrote Leech. 'Their ambition is the ambition of robbers, and their law the law of caprice', he added, and speculated as to why they had not already been assassinated.¹⁰⁷ Of graver concern however were the relations between the Barakzai Kandahar Sirdars and Shah Kamran of Herat. British observers had noted the long-running tensions between these two chiefships and were inclined to view the resulting political situation as fragile. On the one hand, Shah Kamran's repeated incursions forced the Kandahar rulers to look for outside support, potentially in the direction of Persia.¹⁰⁸ The agents of this correspondence were often connected with wider Russian intrigue.¹⁰⁹ But at the same time, this feud weakened Kamran's standing at Herat – Conolly, in particular,

¹⁰⁶ See for example, Conolly, *Journey to the North of India*, 45.

¹⁰⁷ IOR/V/27/270/7, No. X, 'Notice on the Affairs of Candahar...', p. 53. This was a view shared by London. For example, Palmerston referred to the 'wretched creatures of Candahar'. Mss Eur Add 46915, Palmerston to Hobhouse, 27 August 1838, p. 109.

¹⁰⁸ Ellis and then Burnes both flagged this fear. Norris, *The First Afghan War*, 87; IOR/V/27/270/7, No. IV, 'On the Political State of Cabool', p. 16.

¹⁰⁹ Burnes reported as early as September 1837 that the Kandahar-Russian intercourse was to be traced to Abbas Khan who was previously affiliated with Shah Kamran's court and had fled from Herat to Tehran in 1835 where he fell into employment with the Russian Ambassador. His messenger, Mir Muhammad, who was sent to Kandahar to relay an offer of opening diplomatic talks was also described as an agent of Russia. The envoy sent by Persia, Taj Muhammad Khan, was also accused of carrying gifts to the Kandahar Sirdars, provided by the Russian Ambassador at Tehran. IOR/V/27/270/7, No. VII, 'Views and Prospects of Russia and Persia Towards Kandahar', p. 33-4; Mss Eur E.161, 633, Enclosure 3, 3, ff. 23., Enclosure 3, John McNeill to A. Burnes, 13 March 1837.

pointed out that the Heratis were beginning to view these incursions as an attempt by Kamran to extort further taxes from the local population.¹¹⁰

To the east, the loyalty of the Kandahar rulers to their Barakzai brother Dost Muhammad Khan in Kabul was equally strained. Although communications between Kandahar and Kabul were regular, and during the siege of Herat Kandahar had pledged allegiance to Kabul, Burnes was not convinced that their loyalty would survive the fall of Herat. During his time at the court of the Amir, Burnes took it upon himself to advise the Kandahar Sirdars against corresponding with the Persians and on at least one occasion advised Dost Muhammad Khan against marching on Kandahar himself.¹¹¹ From McNeill's perspective, the chief of Kandahar, Kohendil Khan was playing a 'double game', professing allegiance to the ambiguous authority of Dost Muhammad Khan in Kabul, whilst strengthening himself against Kabul and Herat through an alliance with Persia and Russia.¹¹² As the siege progressed during late 1837, Burnes increasingly came to a similar view.¹¹³

KABUL AND PESHAWAR

With Herat apparently on the precipice, and Kandahar's status being seen as strung between Kabul and Tehran, Burnes' position in Kabul throughout the winter of 1837-38 gave him a front row seat as the British crafted a new political geography. Given the fragility of affairs at Kandahar and Herat - both previously within the boundaries of the Saddozai dynasty - a key question facing Burnes was on the ability of Dost Muhammad Khan to exert control over the affairs of these two cities. In short, whilst it was clear to Burnes that Dost Muhammad Khan could *govern*, the question was whether or not he could *rule*.

¹¹⁰ Conolly, *Journey to the North of India*, 51

¹¹¹ IOR MSS Eur F213/68, Burnes to McNeill, 20 November 1837, p. 1.

¹¹² MSS Eur E.161, Correspondence III, 633, 3, ff.23, Enclosure 3., McNeill to Burnes, 13 March 1837.

¹¹³ IOR MSS Eur F213/68, Burnes to McNeill, 20 November 1837, p. 1.

Since the attempt by Shah Shuja to reclaim his throne, Dost Muhammad Khan had sought the recovery of Peshawar. As Burnes and his coterie were making their way up the Indus in early 1837, Afghan-Sikh relations had reached a new low. Fearing a Sikh attempt on Kabul, Dost Muhammad Khan had dispatched his son Akbar Khan to occupy the passes of the Khyber. The operation led to the storming of Sikh positions at Jamrud, and although ending in defeat for the Afghans, the Sikh positions were sufficiently destroyed for the Afghans to declare a moral victory. The operation also resulted in the killing of Hari Singh, the son of Runjit Singh who had led the original assault on Peshawar.¹¹⁴

The renewal of hostilities presented both a challenge and an opportunity for the British. From the perspective of Calcutta, continued Afghan-Sikh rivalry would render any commercial use of the Indus unworkable. Whilst on the one hand, the presence of an external 'infidel' threat, in the form of the Sikhs provided the opportunity for Dost Muhammad Khan to shore up his legitimacy in Kabul and the immediate environs (especially in the highland areas), it was coming at the expense of British interests elsewhere. Furthermore, for the British, the increasingly religious overtones that were infusing the rivalry were naturally anathema to their perceptions of what stability looked like in the region. Aside from the local ramifications, it was feared that the need for military and financial support was driving Dost Muhammad Khan to seek Persian and Russian help. Meanwhile, the British were helpless to counter this with their own support as this would damage their much more important and long-standing alliance with Ranjit Singh.

The opportunity presented itself in the form of a possible negotiated settlement. Burnes' Indus survey was highlighting the sheer limits of Sikh power on the west bank of the river. In general, Sikh rule was largely nominal and only enforceable through a military presence that was ever vulnerable to attack. Local uprisings against Sikh outposts were not infrequent and revenue collection by the Sikhs, where possible, was carried out by armed

¹¹⁴ For an account of this battle see Masson, *Narrative*, III, 384-8.

units.¹¹⁵ Indeed, so limited was Sikh authority in these areas that Burnes was forced to negotiate with local leaders to secure his safe passage. Peshawar was a case in point, described by the political dispatches as 'a drain on the finances of the Lahore State, with the additional disadvantage of being so situated as to lead the Sikhs into constant collision with desperate enemies'.¹¹⁶

Such a state of affairs encouraged the British in the view that the Afghans and Sikhs might reach an agreement on the status of the town, a view supported by previous overtures made by both Ranjit Singh and Dost Muhammad Khan to the British to mediate the dispute.¹¹⁷ Following the Battle of Jamrud, Wade deputed Lieutenant Mackeson to Peshawar, from his position as political agent at Ranjit Singh's court in Lahore. With Burnes making his way to Kabul it was anticipated that this arrangement would allow both parties to come to terms through the British.¹¹⁸ It was in this sense that Auckland admitted in a dispatch to London in late September that more of a 'political character' had been given to Burnes' mission.¹¹⁹ However, the negotiation process suffered from a lack of direction from the outset. Auckland remained dubious of providing favourable terms to the Amir at risk of offending Ranjit Singh, and therefore refused to accept any suggestion of returning Peshawar to Afghan control. In addition, Claude Wade, who provided a *via media* in Ludhiana for intelligence coming from Kabul constantly downgraded the positive picture that Burnes presented with regard to the possibility of reaching an agreement with Dost Muhammad Khan. This important factor was, it seems, partly a result of Wade's jealousy of Burnes, but also his closeness to Shah Shuja's court in exile in Ludhiana.

¹¹⁵ IOR/F/4/1680/67026, Vol V, Burnes, p.251; IOR/V/27/270/7, No. I, 'On the Political Power of the Sikhs Beyond the Indus', p. 1-7.

¹¹⁶ IOR/V/27/270/7, No. I, 'On the Political Power of the Sikhs Beyond the Indus', p.3. These 'collisions' are regularly reported in issues of the *Loodianah Ukhbar* translated into English in *The Delhi Gazette*. IOR SM 52.

¹¹⁷ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, 58.

¹¹⁸ The course of this discussion – and the clashing of (British) egos which it entailed – can be followed at IOR/F/4/1680/67026, p.318-39.

¹¹⁹ Add MSS 36473, Auckland to Hobhouse, 8 September 1837, p. 191.

Lacking clear guidance from London or Simla, Burnes pursued a more conciliatory line towards the Amir, hinting at the possibility of sharing sovereignty over Peshawar between the Sikhs and the Afghans. Indeed two options presented themselves. The first, favoured by Masson, involved the full reinstating of Sultan Muhammad Khan as ruler of Peshawar, the withdrawal of Sikh forces, and the giving of tribute to Ranjit Singh. Masson believed this a likely prospect since it allowed the Sikh ruler to save face (provided it was suggested by the British), and would allow him to withdraw his troops with honour – which due to the challenges he was facing there, was a course he was likely to favour. Although Masson didn't expect Dost Muhammad Khan to be pleased with the outcome, he thought it likely that he would accept it begrudgingly. The second option, suggested by a group of the Amir's secretaries including Mirza Sami Khan and Mirza Imam Verdi, proposed that in exchange for the return of Peshawar to Kabul, one of the Amir's son's could reside at Lahore – effectively as a hostage – guaranteeing Afghan 'good behaviour'.¹²⁰

Neither of these opportunities were put to Ranjit Singh, in large part due to Wade's influence over the negotiation process in the Punjab.¹²¹ In the meantime, the activities of Burnes in Kabul earned him a rebuke from the Governor-General who also wrote to the Amir to strongly urge him to 'relinquish the idea of gaining the government of that territory'. Auckland reminded him that the 'good offices' of the British Government had already saved him from a 'ruinous war' with the Sikhs, and would be withdrawn if he should form any connection with other powers.¹²² This firm line surprised Dost Muhammad Khan, it was a reflection of the growing antipathy held by Auckland towards the ruler.

The 'Peshawar Question' was a significant stumbling block in achieving greater Afghan-Sikh stability. For the British, resolving this dispute was the key to unlocking the region to greater commercial exploitation. Furthermore,

¹²⁰ Witteridge, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan* (2002), 145.

¹²¹ Whitteridge, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan* (2002), 151.

¹²² Norris, *The First Afghan War*, 141

it offered to reduce the Amir's expenditure on ruinous military campaigns, thereby stabilizing his courtly revenue, as well as temper his recourse to religious rhetoric as a pillar of his authority. However, by early 1838, and in large part due to the inefficiency and ineptitude of British information and diplomacy, negotiations had in effect reached an impasse.

Meanwhile, within Kabul, Burnes was being courted by a number of would-be agitators. Some of these discussions were reported back to Macnaghten. Of particular interest were the *Qizilbash*, or 'Persian Faction'. Burnes noted that this community had become disenfranchised under the rulership of Dost Muhammad Khan, and had begun to ghettoize themselves within Kabul. Not only did this raise the prospect of sectarian unrest (the Persians being of the Shi'a sect, the Afghans largely Sunnis), it also encouraged political agitation.¹²³ They were, Burnes claimed, 'intently bent on adding to their own strength by intrigues around them'.¹²⁴ Aside from the military role played by the *Qizilbash*, the position of the Persian community as the secretarial class under the Sadozai regime meant that they also held an influential political position. As Burnes pointed out: 'since every man of rank has Persians for his Secretaries, and *all the home and foreign correspondence is in their hands ...* their influence ramifies in every direction.'¹²⁵ The approach made by a representative of the *Qizilbash* to Burnes merited its own dispatch partly because it confirmed a British belief that this community had political ambitions, but also because their Persian heritage naturally allied them - in the British understanding - to Persian 'intrigue' elsewhere. Should the Herat siege prove successful, it was feared, the *Qizilbash* would provide a ready proxy for Persian influence in the heart of the Kabul political community. It was not out of the question that the *Qizilbash* could win over Dost

¹²³ The fear of sectarianism had historical precedent, an 1809 riot for instance, was attributed by the British to Sunni/Shi'a rivalry although Noelle points out its routes lay more in local rival political elites fanning sectarian identities (Noelle, *State and Tribe*, 26-7; see also Masson, *Narrative*, II, 297). There is evidence that Auckland feared that the fall of Herat to the Persians would exacerbate these tensions (see IOR Add MS 36473, Auckland to Hobhouse, 3 May 1838, p. 245).

¹²⁴ IOR/V/27/270/7, No.II, 'On the Persian Faction in Cabool', p. 8.

¹²⁵ IOR/V/27/270/7, No.II, 'On the Persian Faction in Cabool', p. 8. Emphasis in the original.

Muhammad Khan to their ends; it was likely however that they would favour an alliance with Shah Shuja, should he be supported in reclaiming the throne.

The irresolution of the Herat question provided an ongoing 'information panic' in the midst of an increasingly elaborate picture of intrigue being woven by the British. When it came to engaging with the problem, the harder they looked, the less they seemed to understand. It was, as Auckland put it, 'a fine embroglio [*sic*] of diplomacy and intrigue',¹²⁶ made worse by the opacity of the information made available at Simla and London. The city-based lexicon that divided the picture up between events at Herat, Kandahar, Peshawar, and Kabul provided a degree of legibility for the British. This picture was overlaid with their basic grasp of regional political communities, but the ambiguity that this picture presented was made dangerous by their obsession with the 'intrigues' of Persia and Russia. Meanwhile the impasse over Afghan-Sikh reconciliation at Peshawar tended to favour the Sikh alliance, and for Auckland at least, presented Dost Muhammad Khan as willfully intransigent. The failure of these negotiations further narrowed the policy options for the British, and forced a process of closure on the only question now remaining, namely what path to take.

This section began with consideration of whether or not the British envisaged a unitary polity beyond the Punjab, a key policy question for them in terms of their frontier security. As the discussion above suggests the fragmented polity concept dominated the discourse. In September 1837, Auckland was referring to the 'triple power' of Afghanistan – Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat.¹²⁷ By early 1838 the picture was further complicated by the insecurities brought about by Persian-Herati and Afghan-Sikh relations, as discussed. But this city-based lexicon was not the only ambiguity. Uncertainty also surrounded the notion of a unitary Afghan 'nation'. This ambiguity was perhaps best captured in a dispatch from Burnes to McNeil in mid-1837. Referring to the Anglo-Persian treaty article which stipulated non-intervention by the British in the case of an Afghan-Persian war, Burnes

¹²⁶ IOR Add MS 36473, Auckland to Hobhouse, 6 January, 1838, p. 219.

¹²⁷ IOR Add MS 36473, Auckland to Hobhouse, 8 September 1837, p.188.

asked 'in the first place, who are the Afghans[?] There are three Chiefships at present which may be classed under that head and two of them certainly have interests at variance with each other.'¹²⁸ Burnes was unwittingly hinting at the path that would be taken, namely to reinstate Shah Shuja, and thereby to unify the Afghan polity.

As the above sections have also shown, the history of British engagement with Afghanistan did not begin with the First Anglo-Afghan War, but rather preceded it, albeit in a patchy and spasmodic manner. This engagement sprung forth a number of policy contestations relating to the nature of the threat; the means of intervention; the question over whom to back; and the likelihood of establishing either a unitary or fragmented polity. Each of these contestations manifested themselves in varying ways in the contact zones of the periphery (the domain of the political officers); in Calcutta (and Simla); and in London. In conclusion, this chapter will now consider the final element of this conversion of knowledge into policy in a process of closure around these contested policy debates, with particular attention to the Simla contact zone.

Policy Closure at Simla: The Policy Instantiation of the 'Idea' of Afghanistan

In October 1837, the Governor-General made the decision to embark on a tour of the northern provinces of the Company's rule. He travelled by river as far as Benares (Varanasi), before heading across land to Cawnpur where he was advised to turn back on account of the famine that was raging at the time. Instead he journeyed on to Simla for the summer months, the 'pleasant hill sanitarium' described by Kaye as 'the cradle of more political insanity than any place within the limits of Hindostan'.¹²⁹ Much has been made of this

¹²⁸ Burnes was here referring to Kabul, Kandahar and Herat. The interests at variance were between Kabul and Kandahar. The chiefs at Kandahar had threatened to back Persian moves on Herat. MSS. Eur. E. 161 Correspondence III, No.9, Enclosure 4, Burnes to McNeil, 6th June 1837.

¹²⁹ Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan, Vol. I*, 312. This trip is detailed in the published diaries of Lord Auckland's sister: Emily Eden, *Up the Country* (London: Richard Bentley,

move and the impact it had on the Governor-General's decision-making circle.¹³⁰ Whilst his wider council of advisors were left at Calcutta, Auckland was forced to rely on an inside group of largely 'Russophobic' advisors, including William Macnaghten, Henry Torrens, and John Colvin.¹³¹ The decisions made at Simla, it is frequently asserted, were a consequence of the influence of these advisers, and to an extent (though this is itself contested), the prevaricating tendencies of the Governor-General himself.¹³² This debate matters as it suggests that it may be possible to ascertain blame for the decision to go to war with one particular individual or group of individuals. This is a debate that remains unresolved. What is clear is that the climate of opinion in which the decision was taken was more than the result of one particular group.

It was also clear that London, perhaps by force of circumstance, was satisfied that the Governor-General should make the decision as he saw fit. '[I]t would be inexpedient', noted Palmerston, 'to send Auckland precise ... instructions founded upon a state of things which must necessarily be six or eight months anterior to the time when he receives them, and which may have become inappropriate to the position of affairs.' He continued therefore, 'Auckland and those advisers of his who are with him and on the spot must be the best judges of the measures which varying circumstances may render most expedient; and we ought certainly to leave them a free discretion to act according to the best judgment they can form'.¹³³ Norris argues that despite the slow pace of correspondence, the information flow between London and

1867). Trotter points out that had Auckland followed the advice and returned to Calcutta, the First Anglo-Afghan War may never have happened, J. L. Trotter, *The Earl of Auckland*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893), 48-9.

¹³⁰ Whitteridge, *Charles Masson of Afghanistan* (2002), 159. For a summary of this group see Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan Vol. I*, 312-16.

¹³¹ Macnaghten has come under particular scrutiny in this capacity (Trotter, *The Earl of Auckland*, 46; Noelle, *State and Tribe*, 42; Stewart, *On Afghanistan's Plains*, 9), and also Colvin and Torrens (Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan, Vol. I*, 151-2; Trotter, *The Earl of Auckland*, 46).

¹³² They possessed, according to Kaye, 'dangerous kind of cleverness' Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan, Vol I*, 315. The argument on Auckland's weakness is disputed by Norris who presents him in a more pragmatic light.

¹³³ MSS Eur Add. 46915, Palmerston to Hobhouse, 26 September 1838, p.119-20; See also Palmerston to Hobhouse, 4 October 1838, p.128.

Simla led to the same decisions being reached in both locations.¹³⁴ Whilst this may have been true at the superficial level, the leeway given to Auckland left very little alternative but for him to act according to his best intuitions as officials in London found themselves bound to the decisions taken at Simla. More to the point, the rationale behind those common conclusions differed. Therefore, Kaye's argument that the grand strategic view, which dominated at the higher level, pushed Auckland into 'defensive measures of a dubious character', requires some nuance.¹³⁵ Clearly this view factored into Auckland's decision-making, but absent clear and timely directions from London, the Simla council were forced to rely more on intuition than instruction. The traditional top-down view of strategic decision-making in this case is somewhat inaccurate since communication was simply inadequate to the task in a fast-changing environment. A key element of the intuitive mode relied on the knowledge that had been built up of the country – to return to the point, the grand strategic perspective may have given an overarching rationale, but it did not explain the manner of intervention.

On 26 April 1838, facing the failure of his mission to Kabul, Burnes left the city with a reluctant Masson in tow. The decision by Dost Muhammad Khan to publicly invite an audience with the Russian officer Vitkevitch has often been cited as the last straw for the British mission but more detailed attention shows the indifferent reception that the Russian officer received in both Kandahar and Kabul and suggests that the Amir believed a deal with the British to be more likely. Masson had continued to communicate with Mirza Sami, of the Amir's court even after Burnes had been shunned by the Afghan ruler, and it was suggested that negotiations might continue through Masson but this came to nothing. The day after their departure the Mirza had approached their camp asking if negotiations might be reopened, a suggestion declined by Burnes. Indeed, as late as 12 July, Major Todd, who was making his way from Herat to Simla communicated the 'anxious' wishes of the Kabul ruler to enter into an alliance with the British, and saying that

¹³⁴ Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan*, Vol I, 317; Norris, *The First Afghan War*, 137.

¹³⁵ Stewart also makes this argument, Stewart, *On Afghanistan's Plains*, 29.

Burnes' return to Kabul was 'devoutly wished for by the chiefs and people'.¹³⁶ The courting of Vitkevitch can thus be read as a negotiation tactic to bring the British back to the table with a more favourable offer. By this point however, it was too late.

Auckland immediately interpreted the end of the mission as a signal of the Amir's shifted loyalties and communicated as much in a minute to the Secret Committee of the Court of Directors of the East India Company. In this minute on the 'crisis in Afghan affairs', he claimed that the 'ambitious temper' of the Amir had 'disappointed the expectations' of the British in their hopes for peaceful solution. Any further offers from the Amir, he claimed, would be 'hollow and insincere' and as a result, options of settling affairs would now need to be considered outside of working through Kabul.¹³⁷ He added, '[t]he distracted condition of Afghanistan, from the open and acrimonious contests between the Sikhs and the Chief of Cabool on the one side, and between the Rulers of Candahar and Herat on the other, and from the total absence of any feeling of harmony and mutual confidence among the different branches of the Barukzye family, had been the immediate cause of proffers of submission to Tehran, and of the invitation to Persian and Russian influence into the country.'¹³⁸ The purpose in presenting this disordered state of Afghan affairs was to bolster the view that an alliance with Ranjit Singh was now the only way forward. Although military options were not discussed, the minute proposed that if Herat fell, intervention of some form would be necessary. Crucially, even if Herat survived, the Governor-General argued, the problem of the Barakzai ruler would still require a resolution. '[He] has shown himself to be so disaffected', Auckland claimed, 'that with him, at least, we could form no satisfactory connection.'¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Add MS 36473, Todd to Burnes, 23 June 1838, p. 307.

¹³⁷ IOR/L/PS/20/MEM01/15, No.4, Enclosure 1, No. 1, 'Minute by the Governor General', 12 May 1838, p.4-5.

¹³⁸ IOR/L/PS/20/MEM01/15, No. 4, Enclosure 1, No. 1, 'Minute by the Governor General', 12 May 1838, p.4.

¹³⁹ IOR/L/PS/20/MEM01/15, No.4, Enclosure 1, No. 1, 'Minute by the Governor General', 12 May 1838, p.5.

At the time of this dispatch, Macnaghten was making his way to Lahore to discuss with Ranjit Singh, the options for countering what was now being seen as the primary problem. To aid this discussion, on 23 May, Macnaghten sent requests to Wade, Mackeson, Burnes and Masson, asking for 'the opinion of the best-informed men' on the subject of the 'means of counteraction to the policy of Dost Mahomed Khan'.¹⁴⁰ Macnaghten explicitly requested advice on two points in particular: firstly, whether the Sikhs could establish themselves in Kabul, and secondly whether any 'instrument of Afghan agency' (and if so what), would be required.¹⁴¹ The responses came from Burnes and Masson in short order. Burnes rejected the possibility of establishing Sikh authority in Kabul as 'a mere visionary delusion', citing the limits of the Maharajah's power beyond the Indus, and the logistical challenges of supplying Kabul from Lahore. He recommended instead, that 'British power should appear directly' in any plans in order to ensure complete success. This, Burnes reasoned, would avoid alienating the Afghan people who he claimed were 'cordially displaced as a nation to join us'.¹⁴² In response to the second request Burnes was clear that Shah Shuja was the best instrument: 'the British Government have only to send him to Peshawar with an agent and two of its own Regiments as an honorary escort and an avowal to the Afghans that we have taken up his cause to ensure his being fixed for ever on his throne.'¹⁴³ Once again Burnes claimed that British support would ensure success. In the plans, he urged that the British 'must appear directly for the Afghans are a superstitious people and believe Shooja to have no fortune (*bakht*) but our name will invest him with it.'¹⁴⁴

Although it was much more detailed than Burnes' paper, Masson's dispatch on 8 June reached similar conclusions. He too was skeptical of Sikh involvement in Afghan affairs, writing 'the less the Seiks and Afghans are

¹⁴⁰ Mss Eur E.161, Correspondence III, 23.f.1; Masson, *Narrative*, III, 488.

¹⁴¹ Masson, *Narrative*, III, 488.

¹⁴² Mss Eur F88/105, Burnes to Macnaghten, 2 June 1838, p. 46.

¹⁴³ Mss Eur F88/105, Burnes to Macnaghten, 2 June 1838, p. 47.

¹⁴⁴ Mss Eur F88/105, Burnes to Macnaghten, 2 June 1838, p. 47.

mixed up together ... the better for both parties'.¹⁴⁵ He also favoured the restoration of Shah Shuja, arguing that by doing so 'the British Government would consult the feelings of the Afghan nation, among which his popularity is great, and who even wonder that the Government has not before done it'.¹⁴⁶ For Masson, the ruler of Herat, Shah Kamran - as a Saddozai - ruled by right; whereas the Barakzai in Kabul ruled by usurpation, and a campaign to reinstate Shah Shuja would be joined by all of those discontented with Barakzai rule.

Whilst it is important not to attribute too much to these papers in terms of their influence on the crucial decision over whether or not to go to war, they do highlight key shifts in British thinking at this time, and there is evidence to support the claim that their advice at least bolstered, and arguably shaped the thinking of the Governor-General. Both Masson and Burnes had favoured Shah Shuja in their policy advice, a proposal that had already been floated in a dispatch from Auckland to Macnaghten on 3 June, a day after Burnes had dispatched his response from Hassan Avdal.¹⁴⁷ But aside from this supporting role, the value placed on this advice in its own right was clear. In forwarding the papers to Hobhouse, Auckland cited Burnes' report at length and was keen to point out that Burnes' professed support for the rule of Dost Muhammad Khan made him 'a good witness on this occasion'.¹⁴⁸ Of Masson's paper, Auckland's note on the copy forwarded to Hobhouse makes it clear. It reads: 'This, of papers sent in by Capt Wade, Capt Burnes, Lt Mackeson and Mr Masson all in the same sense gives, I think, very much the clearest view of the state of parties and politics in Afghanistan.'¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Add MS 36473, Masson 'Means of counteracting the policy of Dost Mahomed Khan', 8 June 1838, p. 375.

¹⁴⁶ Add MS 36473, Masson 'Means of counteracting the policy of Dost Mahomed Khan', p. 374.

¹⁴⁷ Add MS 36473, Auckland to Hobhouse, June 3 1838, p. 252-3. In this dispatch the Governor-General suggests that in light of the warming Anglo-Sikh alliance, it should be made clear to the Maharajah that the fall of Herat and a Persian march to Kandahar, would prompt 'the advance of a military force to the banks of the Indus'. Auckland further suggested proposing to the Sikh ruler 'whether upon this measure may not also be grafted the adoption of Shah Shooja', adding that 'his claims to the throne of Cabul must become matter for future discussion and consideration as further information may be obtained.'

¹⁴⁸ Add MS 36473, Auckland to Hobhouse, June 17 1838, p. 265.

¹⁴⁹ Add MS 36473, Masson 'Means of counteracting the policy of Dost Mahomed Khan', 8 June 1838, p. 375.

Aside from the question over whom to back, both papers provided clear contributions to the question of the viability of a unitary Afghan polity. Burnes dismissed as anachronistic the fears of some over establishing a 'strong Mahomedan neighbour' and urged that the British 'should consolidate the Afghan power west of the Indus and have a King and not a collection of Chiefs.' As he reasoned, "*Divide et impera*" is a temporising creed at any time and if the Afghans are united we either bid defiance to Persia and instead of distant relations we have every thing under our own eye and a steadily progressing influence all along the Indus.'¹⁵⁰ The clear normative distinction between the ineffective 'Chief' and the authoritative 'King' chimed with the regal air to which Shah Shuja, as the Saddozai heir, had been viewed by the British.

Masson, however, provided a more calibrated argument. The dispatches from Calcutta and Simla had demonstrated a clear preoccupation with the Herat question, and Masson accordingly shaped his advice in line with this concept. He noted that the removal of the Barakzai ruler from Kabul would immediately put a stop to the intercourse between Kabul and Herat, and the choice of Shah Shuja *in particular* would represent the installation of a ruler whose interests were 'identical with those of Kamran'.¹⁵¹ Should the siege of Herat prove a failure, it would only be a matter of time, Masson reasoned, before another attempt would be made. In such a situation he noted, 'it would be pitiful that he should look in vain, as he has done in his present emergency, to the Afghans of the East for assistance. The restoration of Shah Sujah would prevent this disgraceful recurrence'.¹⁵² In place of a divided polity ruled by an 'antinational' clique, Afghanistan would thereby be constituted of two separate Governments, one in Kabul and Kandahar, and one in Herat; a

¹⁵⁰ Mss Eur F88/105, Burnes to Macnaghten, 8 June 1838, p. 48.

¹⁵¹ Add MS 36473, Masson 'Means of counteracting the policy of Dost Mahomed Khan', 8 June 1838, p. 374.

¹⁵² Add MS 36473, Masson 'Means of counteracting the policy of Dost Mahomed Khan', 8 June 1838, 375.

division that was 'nearly a natural one', argued Masson, and between 'whose equal interest it would be to oppose Persia'.¹⁵³

On 17 June, the Governor-General was demonstrating a greater degree of decisiveness over the policy. Labelling Dost Muhammad Khan a 'kuzilbash [sic] to the Westward'¹⁵⁴ he updated Hobhouse on a 'plan of action' that he sought to put before Ranjit Singh: 'That Shah Shooja shall advance with levies under British officers and with British money upon Candahar, and that his eldest son, also attended by British officers and backed by the Sikh army, if necessary, shall march upon Cabul.'¹⁵⁵ In the climate of growing expectation of military action the Governor-General highlighted the 'spirit of mischief' that manifested itself in rumour, as reported by the network of newswriters based throughout India. These reports, often passed through Wade, and some of which appeared in the *Loodiana Ukhbar* circulated in the Punjab, implicated an array of regional states including Nepal, Burma, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Persia, Russia, and even China in varying degrees of subversion against the British. Generally these were dismissed, although as one Colonel Skinner offered darkly, 'I know from my experience of India that there is something stirring.'¹⁵⁶

Burnes followed up his June advice with a paper to John Colvin in July on 'the most judicious means of agitating for Shah Shooja's restoration', clearly instrumentalizing the ethnographic and political information that he had accumulated during his recent travels in region.¹⁵⁷ In particular, Burnes sought a solution to the tricky problem of marching a Sikh army through Peshawar, a territory known to be hostile to Sikh presence. Plans were moving forward quickly. By August, the Commander-in-Chief of British forces in India, Sir Henry Fane – who had been at Simla and at the ear of the Governor-General throughout July – warned the regiments he had selected of

¹⁵³ Add MS 36473, Masson 'Means of counteracting the policy of Dost Mahomed Khan', 8 June 1838, 375.

¹⁵⁴ Add MS 36473, Auckland to Hobhouse, 17 June 1838, 262.

¹⁵⁵ Add MS 36473, Auckland to Hobhouse, 17 June 1838, 263.

¹⁵⁶ Add MS 36473, Extract of a letter from Col Skinner, 2 June 1838, 280.

¹⁵⁷ Mss Eur F470/2, Burnes, 'Notes on the most judicious means of agitating for Shah Shooja's restoration', 20 July, 1838.

their upcoming duty. On 13 September the general order for mobilization was sent out.

In London meanwhile, opinions were also changing. The landings of Kharg island were now pressuring the Shah but with troops numbering just 500 it was more a show of force than a credible military option. Moreover, Palmerston was skeptical of a land invasion of Persia fearing it would drive Persia further into Russian arms, and prompt an insurrection amongst the Persian people. Rather, Palmerston was increasingly viewing Afghanistan as 'the quarter where the real work is to be done'; a distinct area of operations at which the British could 'aim directly' and where whatever was accomplished could be afterwards maintained.¹⁵⁸

On 1 October the Governor-General published his infamous Simla Manifesto, a publically released statement that amounted to a declaration of war against Dost Muhammad Khan and the Kandahar chiefs. The Simla Manifesto was a deliberately obfuscatory document that constructed the reasons for war around a number of misleading assertions. Among these, it presented the Amir as an aggressor and a threat to the Sikhs, and British India as a whole. The document further accused the Amir of an intransigent approach to British attempts at Afghan-Sikh mediation, and of welcoming Persian influence into the country – a policy that was connected to the siege at Herat. The Kandahar chiefs were further accused of having 'avowed their adherence' to the Persians. The presentation of Afghanistan as a fractured and now threatening polity was clear: 'It had been clearly ascertained, from the information furnished by the various officers who have visited Afghanistan, that the Barukzye chiefs, from their disunion and unpopularity, were ill fitted, under any circumstances, to be useful allies to the British Government, and to aid us in our just and necessary measures of national defence.' In light of the recent events the manifesto argued a new policy was now required; one that provided on the 'western frontier an ally who is interested in resisting aggression, and establishing tranquility, in the place of chiefs ranging

¹⁵⁸ MSS Eur Add. 46915, Palmerston to Hobhouse, 27 August 1838, p. 109.

themselves in subservience to a hostile power, and seeking to promote schemes of conquest and aggrandisement.’¹⁵⁹ The unifying figure of Shah Shuja was thereby presented as allowing for the ‘independence and integrity’ of Afghanistan, and restoring the ‘union and prosperity of the Afghan people’.¹⁶⁰

As previously noted, the backdrop of the ongoing siege of Herat continued to provide a justification for ongoing military plans. However, in September the picture began to change. The arrival of Major Todd’s dispatch in July had supported the view that the stationing of a British troop contingent in the Persian Gulf would be sufficient to alter Persian calculations, and the communiqué reported that the defence of Herat was ‘gallantly maintained’.¹⁶¹ With troops now present on the island of Kharg, the prediction proved correct. Durand dates the lifting of the siege of Herat on 9 September, four days before Fane’s general order for mobilization was issued, however, rumours of this did not reach Simla till 13 October.¹⁶² By this point the Governor-General had already published the Simla Manifesto, however the message did reach Simla, in theory, in time for the troops to have stood down. But despite the pretext having been lifted, the campaign went ahead.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan*, Vol. I, 372-3.

¹⁶⁰ Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan*, Vol. I, 373-4.

¹⁶¹ Add MS 36473, Todd, 23 June 1838, p. 306.

¹⁶² Add MS 36473, Auckland to Hobhouse, 13 October, 1838, p. 331. This was confirmed on 15 October, (Durand, *The First Afghan War and its Causes*, 79). Ironically, despite the distance, confirmation of this fact reached the Foreign Office in London only two days later on 17 October (Norris, *The First Afghan War*, 217).

¹⁶³ The fact that the pretext had been lifted was a view shared by Henry Willock, former British envoy to Tehran, who wrote to the Foreign Secretary in early December 1838 (F88/105, Willock to Palmerston, 1 December 1838, p.109). It is also a view shared by Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan*, Vol. I, 383; Stewart, *On Afghanistan’s Plains*, 37; and Masson, *Narrative*, III, 490.

Conclusion: Afghanistan as a Policy Problem

The continuation of British plans to invade Afghanistan despite the failure of the siege of Herat has added weight to the claim of the inherent belligerence and imperialist urges of British India, fearful of Russian ingress and driven by ignorance and hubris. But it is essential to note that Russia and Britain were ostensibly on friendly terms at this point. London was happy to let Auckland make his mind up, and he was keen to avoid the implication of Russia in the decision to go to war to prevent a conflagration in relations that might be played out in Europe. This has encouraged the view that there was a wider, unspoken, British fear of Russian expansion; a paranoia that can be identified in the archives. This fear cannot be avoided in the explanation but it is not sufficient explanation. Just as important were the regional aspects, notably the priority placed by the British, on their alliance with the Sikh Kingdom.

This chapter has sought to add more depth to this analysis by drawing out the policy debates behind the decision to invade. The foundations of the reasoning over why the British felt the opportunity was ripe to achieve their ends are to be found in how they began to view the possibility of a future Afghanistan under British influence; how Afghanistan as a unitary polity was imagined. When we consider these images we begin to see that, contrary to almost all histories of this period, the decision to invade Afghanistan had much more to do with Afghanistan itself, and British understandings of it, than wider grand-strategic narratives.

The chapter has sought to identify how these understandings were shaped by colonial knowledge of Afghanistan, and in turn how they began to shape that knowledge itself. What mattered to the British was stability first and foremost, an independent Afghanistan, and a pro-British ruler if possible. In their own imagined view of Sadozai authority, based on their understanding of Afghanistan's history, and the policy advice of informed experts, the

British saw in Shah Shuja, the possibility of achieving all three. This was the Afghanistan context into which their wider strategic ambitions were nested; it was in this sense that the partial, spasmodic, and tendentious history of British engagement with Afghanistan could be said to have made the First Afghan War imaginable in the first place. In particular, the British had constructed a powerful perception that there was the possibility of a unified state under Shah Shuja relying on the Barakzai/Saddozai concept of the Afghan polity, a perspective that had been supported by the policy advice of Burnes and Masson in particular. Guided by this image, the lifting of the siege of Herat did not remove the need for British intervention, arguably in fact, it made a unified state more likely to succeed with the anticipated alliance of Kamran in Herat and Shuja in Kabul.

In essence, this was the story of the conversion of knowledge of Afghanistan into a policy science for the powerful; a quest for legibility combining with a demand for closure emanating from Simla and London. Over a year into his new post in Kabul, on 4 July 1840, Alexander Burnes wrote to his political masters a memo titled 'observations on the restored government of Shah Shooja'. In it he alluded to the recent resurgence of Afghanistan to the forefront of British imperial concerns, a country he described 'which hitherto seemed as it were not'.¹⁶⁴ The British were beginning to believe that their predictions would prove correct. They were about to have this illusion shattered. The legacy of this realization is the subject of the next chapter.

¹⁶⁴ IOR MSS Eur F213/89, Burnes 'Observations on the restored Government of Shah Shooja', 4 July 1840.

Chapter Four

The Era of Exception: Anglo-Afghan Relations After the First Anglo-Afghan War

The First Anglo-Afghan War had a lasting impact on Anglo-Afghan relations. This chapter tracks the development of the 'idea' of Afghanistan following the disasters of this war, beginning with the immediate aftermath, during which time Afghanistan became cast as a 'violent geography', a representation that sustained a prolonged period of non-intervention. This period is frequently portrayed as one in which growing concerns of Russian imperial expansion eventually overcame these fears and forced an aggressive forward move by the British. The debates surrounding this are typically framed in terms of imperial rivalry and the schism between 'forward policy' adherents who favoured a British military position within Afghanistan, versus 'close border' adherents who favoured a position on the Indus. This chapter questions this simplistic narrative. Whilst British fears of Russian expansion cannot be discounted, the genesis of those fears is deserving of closer attention. Similarly, the frontier debates of this era should be located in the political, intellectual and cultural shifts that were impacting upon the colonial state at this time.

In the first instance, a perspective that favours a simple Anglo-Russian rivalry overlooks the patterns of cooperation that were apparent between London, Calcutta and St Petersburg in a number of areas. In particular, a more complete analysis should acknowledge the presence of shared imperial outlooks on the duties and responsibilities of great powers *vis-à-vis* 'uncivilized', even 'barbarous', states. Such an approach provides insight into

the way in which both powers sought to legitimize their actions, and routinize their relations with each other, at the expense of Central Asian polities.

In addition, the policy debates in India and London concerning Anglo-Afghan relations demand a greater degree of nuance than the forward policy/close border policy schism suggests. These debates were about more than military strategy, encompassing political measures too, and were as much about the 'character' of British imperialism, as they were about its administration. The conduct of Anglo-Afghan relations was therefore subject to a multitude of voices. These debates often said more about the conduct of Indian affairs than they did about Afghanistan itself, but sustaining this was a prevailing view of Afghanistan as a certain *type* of polity, sustained by events unfolding within the region at this time. Perhaps most impactful were the instabilities brought by the death of Dost Muhammad Khan in 1863, as well as an apparent growing role for Islam in the authority structures of Afghan rule – a change that the British were apt to view as indicative of 'fanaticism', placing the Afghan polity beyond the pale of civilized diplomatic discourse, indeed as inimical to it. This perception was one of the key areas in which British presence on the north-west frontier influenced the conduct of Anglo-Afghan relations at this time.

The period from 1858 onwards witnessed a drift away from the specificities that had attended colonial knowledge during the era preceding the First Anglo-Afghan War, as knowledge of Afghanistan became swept up in wider imperial visions of global order. Whilst the aftermath of the war had witnessed its representation as a violent geography of conflict and lawlessness, wider diplomatic imperatives forced a degree of *détente* between Kabul and Calcutta. Meanwhile, new 'imaginative spheres'¹ began to impact on the conduct of these relations and draw upon these 'free-floating' imaginative tropes. A key driver in this sense related to a debate over

¹ Duncan Bell, 'Victorian visions of global order: An introduction' in Duncan Bell (ed.), *Victorian Visions of Global Order* (Cambridge: CUP), 9.

international legal jurisprudence between 'positivists' and 'naturalists'. It is worth summarizing this debate in order to explain its relevance.

For those favouring the 'natural law' perspective, sovereign rulers were bound in their actions by a pre-existing extra-legal structure, based on religion, contractarian principles, or convention - or a combination of these. International law consisted therefore of a set of 'transcendental principles' of justice and an overarching sense of morality that could be accessed by reason and was applicable to all.² During the mid to late nineteenth century this position was challenged by a more 'scientific' positivist conception,³ given credence by a professionalising legal class, which viewed international law rather as the product of sovereign will. Positivist international law consisted of 'those rules that had been agreed upon by sovereign states, either explicitly or implicitly, as regulating relations between them.'⁴ Identifying the rationale upon which this positivist law should be built gave rise to a key distinction between 'civilized' (in effect, European) states, who were the creators and insurers of these agreed principles; and 'uncivilized' states, to whom this European 'law of nations' did not, or could not, apply by virtue of their societal, political, and cultural nature.⁵ Of central importance to this legally enshrined prejudice was the notion of 'the capacity for reciprocity'.⁶

² Anghie, 'Finding the Peripheries', 9-10.

³ As Casper Sylvest has shown, this simple narrative of a nineteenth century transition from natural law to positive legal jurisprudence is misleading, but for the purposes of this discussion it is sufficient to identify this as a broad trend. See: Casper Sylvest, 'The foundations of Victorian international law' in Duncan Bell (ed.), *Victorian Visions of Global Order* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007).

⁴ Anghie, 'Finding the Peripheries', 11.

⁵ As Gerrit Gong shows, this 'civilized' standard was more of a concept than a list of requirements. This concept was always vague, and frequently inconsistent. Nonetheless he identifies the following assumptions describing a 'civilized state':

1. 'guarantees basic rights, i.e. life, dignity, and property; freedom of travel, commerce, and religion, especially that of foreign nationals'.

2. 'exists as an organized political bureaucracy with some efficiency in running the state machinery, and some capacity to organize for self-defence'.

3. 'adheres to generally accepted international law, including the laws of war ... maintains a domestic system of courts, codes, and published laws which guarantee legal justice for all within its jurisdiction, foreigners and native citizens alike'.

4. 'fulfils the obligations of the international system by maintaining adequate and permanent avenues for diplomatic interchange and communication.'

5. 'by and large conforms to the accepted norms and practices of the 'civilized' international society, e.g. suttee [sati], polygamy, and slavery were considered 'uncivilized', and therefore unacceptable'. Gong, *The Standard of 'Civilization' in International Society*, 14-5.

⁶ Pitts, 'Boundaries of Victorian International Law', 67.

'Uncivilized states' were viewed by jurists as being incapable of reciprocal diplomatic exchange due to a variety of factors including civilizational backwardness; a lack of sufficiently abstract notions of justice; and (particularly in the case of certain Asian states) the hostility of Islam to 'infidels'.⁷ Positivism, as a legal theory (and indeed as an epistemological standpoint), was believed to rest upon an objective reality observable by reference to 'facts'. Accordingly, the criteria by which an 'uncivilized' state was judged, implicitly rested upon pre-existing understandings of such polities and states. Colonial knowledge therefore came to sustain and legitimize the representation of Afghanistan as an 'uncivilized' state. By extension, states viewed as uncivilized were placed in a separate 'normative universe' by the great powers. As such, exceptional measures could be justified, and a general derogation from the established practices of interstate conduct, directed towards 'uncivilized states' by European powers, was normatively sanctioned. This shift in international legal theory is important in reaching a more complete understanding of Anglo-Afghan relations at this time.

The vagaries of the standard of 'civilization' prompted frequent debate, and though it was assumed by most positivist jurors that non-European states lay outside of the confines of 'civilization', there were clearly nuances within this designation.⁸ As descriptive terms, 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' therefore exhibited gradations in definition. In addition, the Liberal zeal that accompanied British imperial thought, particularly during the second half of the nineteenth century, carried with it the possibility of a 'civilizing influence', brought by Europeans to their subject populations.⁹ This powerful idea would have a clear impact on both British and Russian framings of their actions in Central Asia.

⁷ Pitts, 'Boundaries of Victorian International Law', 68.

⁸ Pitts, 'Boundaries of Victorian International Law'; Gong, *The Standard of 'Civilization' in International Society*.

⁹ Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Especially Chapter 5.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, Afghanistan was sitting uneasily in British perceptions as both a violent, exceptional space and yet a domain of possibility. It was viewed as a potential recipient of the 'civilising effect' of British imperialism – including commercial expansion¹⁰ - and also a territory that should be managed out of consideration of wider geopolitical interests. These visions of empire often clashed, and provoked prolonged debate, prompted in part by new technologies, as well as concomitant intellectual perspectives on the potential reach and forms of imperial power.¹¹ Improvements in communications technology, particularly the electric telegraph; the growth of railway transport, and steam powered shipping, in conjunction with the opening of the Suez Canal, allowed for a more global perspective in imperial defence and security. Accordingly, a new breed of increasingly mobile experts could think globally about the pressing policy issues of the time. Meanwhile, a more centralized bureaucracy encouraged a generic, ordered, and 'scientific' approach to public policy concerning civil and military affairs. This would have a clear impact on the manner in which Afghanistan was discussed amongst certain communities of policy-makers. Once more, Afghanistan was being subjected to new forms of 'academic' and 'imaginative' knowledge.

This chapter can be divided chronologically into two parts. The first tracks Anglo-Afghan relations during Amir Dost Muhammad Khan's second reign. The second considers the period following his death in 1863.

¹⁰ Suhash Chakravarty, *From Khyber to Oxus: A Study in Imperial Expansion* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1976).

¹¹ Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain*.

Part One - Anglo-Afghan Relations During the Second Reign of Dost Muhammad Khan

The First Anglo-Afghan War and its Aftermath

In early November 1838, the largest army ever to have assembled under the Raj gathered at Ferozepore in the Punjab. Roughly 1,000 Europeans, 14,000 East India Company Sepoys, 6,000 irregulars hired by Shah Shuja, and 38,000 Indian camp followers formed the 'Army of the Indus'.¹² The bulk of the army left for the Bolan Pass via Sind in December 1838, taking Kandahar in April 1839 with little resistance following the flight of the Kandahar *sirdars* to Herat. A second, smaller contingent headed via the Khyber pass. The aim was to split the Amir's defensive forces. Three months later, Ghazni fell to the British and on 6 August Shah Shuja entered Kabul after Dost Muhammad Khan's military support deserted him and he fled north towards Bokhara. Amongst the defectors to the British side was Haji Khan who had hosted Masson and was selected by the British as a guide in the pursuit of Dost Muhammad Khan, although he allegedly led them astray.¹³ Following a brief attempt to regain his throne the following year through the agency of northern constituencies in Turkistan, Hazarajat, and Kohistan, Dost Muhammad Khan eventually surrendered to a pension arrangement in Ludhiana. He would soon return.

The British established fortifications at Kandahar, Kalat-i-Ghilzai, Ghazni, Kabul, and Jalalabad, and forward cantonments in Charikar to the north of Kabul, and at Bamiyan to the west. They also occupied Quetta south of Kandahar, and Ali Masjid in the Khyber Pass in order to secure supply lines.¹⁴ By October 1839, Alexander Burnes, having reopened a correspondence with Mountstuart Elphinstone that had been disrupted by the war, expressed

¹² Dalrymple, *Return of A King*, 152.

¹³ Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War*, 54.

¹⁴ Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 381.

cautious optimism in his new role as deputy British envoy in Kabul, writing 'we will withdraw our Army – embed the Afghans under British Officers – Leave the King to govern without our appearing to interfere and give him money to pay some of his troops till he can by acquiring Balkh and Peshawar pay them himself – I think we shall have a good footing in this country'.¹⁵ By the following year the British presence had taken on more expansive aims. As Burnes reflected in a memorandum:

'The ruling policy ... as it appears to me, should be to gain the friendship and confidence of the people of the country, to revise the assessments on land, to heal past difference, to overawe or conciliate the lawless, to protect the roads, to ensure, on them, not merely safety but light duties, to encourage commerce. The King we have placed over them ought to shew [sic], by the benefits of his rule, by attention to the declining national institutions, by the mildness yet firmness of his way, the justice of his administration, the vigour of his councils and the equity of his proceedings that his rule surpasses that which has been superseded and is for the interests of the nation.'¹⁶

The first signs of resistance came in May 1840 with a Ghilzai attack on a column moving between Ghazni and Kabul.¹⁷ However, following the suppression by the Shah's troops of repeated uprisings in Kandahar in August 1841, as well as the earlier failure of Dost Muhammad Khan's attempts in the north, many British officials hoped that Shah Shuja's authority had been accepted. The situation rapidly deteriorated in late 1841.

In September in a cost-saving measure, the British envoy, William Macnaghten, cut subsidies to the Ghilzai tribes sparking a rebellion in the Khyber Pass regions that closed off communications between Jalalabad and Kabul. Meanwhile, an uprising in Kohistan claimed the Charikar outpost, with Major Eldred Pottinger escaping to report its collapse. On 2 November a riot in Kabul, apparently led by disenfranchised Barakzai court nobles and

¹⁵ IOR MSS Eur F88/111, Burnes to Elphinstone, 24 October 1839, p. 82.

¹⁶ IOR MSS Eur F213/89, Alexander Burnes, 'Observations on the restored government of Shah Shooja', 4 July 1840.

¹⁷ Resistance to British administration along this route began as early as 1839. Aside from the rebellions prompted by Dost Muhammad Khan's activities in the north, elsewhere, Sayyid Hashim of Kunar declared independence. There were also minor rebellions in Bajaur, Jalalabad, and Kandahar. See Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan*, 45-9.

members of the *ulema* unattached to Shah Shuja's court, stormed the house of Burnes and killed him. The subsequent killing of the Chief of the Treasury, Captain Johnson, suggested a monetary motive to the uprising, and the damage to the prestige of certain elite communities threatened by British redistributions appeared to have been a key factor.¹⁸ Yet numerous grievances, including the lewd behaviour of British troops and officials with Afghan women, have also been identified as a driver of the violence.¹⁹ Two days later the British Commissariat fort housing almost the entirety of the army's provisions was besieged, falling to the rebels a few days later. The army was soon 'on the verge of starvation'²⁰ and faced a growing rebellion that was showing greater signs of cohesion.²¹ The British attempted a negotiated withdrawal that ended in a failed effort by William Macnaghten, the British envoy and chief negotiator, to split the insurgents – an attempt that cost him his life.²² The army faced no option but to retreat to the Jalalabad garrison, and on 6 January 1842, the remaining troops and camp followers made their way back through the Khyber Pass. The vast majority were either captured or killed by Ghilzai tribesmen.²³ Only a handful of survivors returned.²⁴ In retribution for the destruction of this retreating column, a second army returned in the autumn of 1842, exacting brutal

¹⁸ Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War*, 63-4. Noelle, *State and Tribe*, 50.

¹⁹ Dalrymple, *Return of A King*.

²⁰ Fraser-Tytler, *Afghanistan*, 116; Patrick Macrory, *Signal Catastrophe* (London: The History Book Club Ltd., 1967), 162-4.

²¹ Johnson attributes this to the arrival in Kabul of Dost Muhammad Khan's favourite son, Muhammad Akbar Khan, whose family connections (including through his marriage alliance with Muhammad Shah Khan of the eastern Ghilzais) assured a greater overarching authority. However, the nominal leader of the insurrection was Dost Muhammad Khan's nephew Nawab Muhammad Zaman Khan, with Aminullah Khan Logari as his *wazir* (minister) and Abdullah Khan Achakzai the commander-in-chief. Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War*, 65; Noelle, *State and Tribe*, 51.

²² The nominal Afghan military commander of the rebellion, Akbar Khan, sensing that Macnaghten was attempting to engineer a more favourable solution tricked the envoy into signing an agreement that would effectively split the insurgents, which he then showed to the other rebel leaders. Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War*, 71-2.

²³ The retreating column consisted of around 4,500 troops (690 Europeans, 2,840 Indian Sepoy infantry, 970 Sepoy cavalry), and over 12,000 camp followers. Dupree, 'The Retreat of the British Army from Kabul to Jalalabad in 1842', 53.

²⁴ Contrary to popular belief Dr William Brydon was not the sole survivor, around 150 soldiers and camp followers were taken captive and later released following the return of the British force in 1842. Brydon's own account lists a number of survivors who arrived in the days and weeks following his own return. Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire, and the World, 1600-1850* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 350.

revenge on the Afghan population, and on Kabul. This time there would be no occupation and the army retreated once more.

The failures of the British occupation of Afghanistan have been detailed in numerous historical and contemporary works. Earlier accounts have tended to emphasize the administrative and strategic failures of the EIC and government officials. More recent accounts have turned the spotlight instead on the nature of the Afghan resistance and its deeper origins.²⁵ As Rob Johnson has noted, 'despite the presence of the British forces, the conflicts that occurred between 1839 and 1842 were really a continuation of the dynastic struggle and civil war that had begun in 1803, or perhaps even earlier'.²⁶ These more recent works have also shown how the British intervention affected the political dynamic within Afghanistan, mobilizing, empowering, and dividing in different ways, the diverse social and political fabric of the Afghan polity. Moreover, as Johnson's work demonstrates, the resistance to British occupation was far from unified or geographically spread across the country, but rather fragmented and localized.²⁷ In the aftermath of the British intervention, the fleeting moments of rebel cohesion dwindled once more as Kabuli politics was fractured by competing communities whose claims to authority had been disturbed by the administrative and political legacies of the British-backed Shuja regime. Although the Islamic call to faith presented a veneer of common purpose, a more nuanced reading of the situation, as recent scholarship has shown, demonstrates a far more pragmatic approach to both the formation and dissolution of political alliances, and the military tactics adopted by the rebel groups.

One of the striking features of the British archival accounts at this time concerns the growth in local knowledge resulting from the role of political officers stationed in various British outposts. The findings of these officials

²⁵ Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan* (see pages 38-59 for the First Anglo-Afghan War); Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War*.

²⁶ Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War*, 53.

²⁷ Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War*, Chapter 2.

are telling. A young Lieutenant Henry Rawlinson submitted a paper on the 'Dooranee Tribes' of Kandahar, providing survey data on land use, revenue, and tenure, as well as taxation systems, military divisions (based on land rights), and the history of the treatment of Durrani groups by successive Afghan rulers.²⁸ Rawlinson found that the instabilities in the south were the result of engrained historical grievances within the Durrani tribal confederacy, and that although there was optimism at the return of the Sadozai era, the golden age of *sirdars* and *khans* had been displaced under the Barakzai dynasty, reducing the chiefs of the Kandahar tribes to 'little better than mere plodding farmers'.²⁹ He argued that the failure of Shah Shuja's regime to reform the exactions of the Barakzai era land revenue collection systems led to a renewal of disillusionment and an 'abundant repining and disgust among these ... farmers and their agricultural dependents that a brighter field was not suddenly opened to them'.³⁰

Elsewhere, Major Lynch, stationed in the regions surrounding Peshawar provided a detailed account of the Turan Ghilzai, a report that was largely informed by oriental stereotyping, but also recorded population data and genealogical information, as well as geology and 'antiquities'.³¹ Lynch's report further demonstrates how the British were developing a greater familiarity with elements of the Afghan population, albeit often through a heavily prejudicial Orientalist lens. However, the position of those such as Lynch became increasingly precarious as they became embroiled in local disputes and as political decisions higher up the chain of command prompted blowback at the local level. In the case of Lynch, his own policy of advocating the removal of certain tribal leaders to 'establish tranquillity',³² as well as the imprisonment of other local elites by the British elsewhere, appeared to

²⁸ L/PS/18/A2 'Report by Lieutenant (now Sir) Henry C. Rawlinson, on the Dooranee Tribes', 19 April 1841. It is a mark of the importance of this paper that it was still appearing in the *Gazetteer of Afghanistan*, a handbook for officers stationed on the frontier, as late as 1910. Anderson, 'Poetics and Politics in Ethnographic Texts'.

²⁹ L/PS/18/A2, 'Report ... on the Dooranee Tribes', p. 93.

³⁰ L/PS/18/A2, 'Report ... on the Dooranee Tribes', p. 93. For further detail see Martin, *A Brief History of Helmand*.

³¹ L/PS/3/11/Part 4, p. 729-75.

³² L/PS/3/11/Part 4, 'Report on the Tooran Guljies by Major Lynch', p. 764. Here Lynch referred specifically to Samud Khan, a Takhi elder appointed by the Shah.

render his position increasingly tenuous. Moreover, such policies invited accusations of double-standards, as Lynch noted: when the Afghans 'are told that [Shah Shuja] is King of Afghanistan and supported only by the British Government ... they conceive it [a] rather curious fact that Shah Shujah should be King of Afghanistan and have his state prison in India or London'.³³

Such reports were the natural continuation of a project initiated by earlier European explorers. Indeed Rawlinson's report was just one early example of a career that would see him become one of a new breed of colonial Afghanistan 'experts' – many of whom had a role in the First Anglo-Afghan War.³⁴ These accounts were also inflected by the colonial knowledge of these forebears, as well as by the preconceptions of Afghan political history that earlier works carried – as with the Saddozai/Barakzai schism highlighted in Rawlinson's report. But this local perspective was subsumed by an ongoing historical revisionism. Alexander Burnes was exemplary in this respect. In a July 1840 report he evoked the 'boundless ambition of Russia' that prompted the British to action in Afghanistan. Ignoring the policy contestations that he had been a part of, he confidently declared that the 'told steps of supplanting the existing order of things in Afghanistan having once been determined upon, was, as anticipated, followed by complete success ... To anyone who had in the least attended to the history of Afghanistan, since its dismemberment, its division into Chiefs, its feuds, in fact its almost entire extinction as a nation, this result must have been foreseen.³⁵ Such accounting gave the impression that the British were restoring a 'social compact', but this vision of unity was largely of their own making.

Elsewhere, prominent military figures reprised their earlier Russophobia, lauding the initial military successes in Afghanistan to further buttress their claim for greater expenditure on the Indian Army. General Whittingham, a

³³ L/PS/3/11/Part 4, 'Report on the Tooran Guljies...', p. 774-5.

³⁴ The link between those who fought in the First Anglo-Afghan War, and later served in posts on the north west frontier is made clear in Charles Allen, *Soldier Sahibs: The Men Who Made the North-West Frontier* (London: Abacus, 2001). Rawlinson's later scholarly activities relating to Afghanistan included assistance in editing J.P. Ferrier's travel volume, *Caravan Journeys and Wanderings in Persia, Afghanistan, Turkistan, and Beloochistan*.

³⁵ MSS Eur F213/89, 4 July 1840, 'Observations on the restored Government of Shah Shooja'.

long time lobbyist at the highest levels of the British Government, urged a more prolonged occupation, noting approvingly that '[w]e have by our recent successes not only become fully acquainted with Affghanistan, its strong Passes, and its means of defence, but we have these strong holds [sic] in our keeping; it will therefore be our own fault if Russia ever attacks us at a disadvantage in the East'.³⁶ Whittingham laid out what would later become a familiar argument, to support his call for greater military expansion, claiming that any paucity of numbers would 'doubly increase its danger by inviting attack'. Retreat, he argued, would demonstrate weakness: 'the option is no longer open to us', he declared.³⁷

As events turned against the British, however, a new form of organizational politics also began to warp the historical record as officials sought to exonerate themselves from their share of the blame, and from their share of the consequences. Aside from the political furore in London that met news of the 1842 retreat, a dispute erupted between the Court of Directors of the East India Company and the Government of India concerning the question of whether the decision to go to war had been made on grounds of 'European objects' (i.e. Russian moves), or whether it constituted a purely 'Asiatic question' and therefore concerned the interests of only the East India Company. The answer to this would determine the extent to which the Company could be held liable for financial indemnities. This was a pertinent question. The UK budget surplus had been at £3,000,000 in 1836, but following the Afghan war it now stood at a deficit of £2,430,000.³⁸ This situation had been exacerbated by abortive attempts to introduce British Indian currency in Kabul and Kandahar, the failure of which imperilled the financial stability of the entire Company, its relations with bankers across India, and in turn, the fiscal stability of the British Government in India.³⁹ Members of the Court of Directors therefore demanded full disclosure of

³⁶ MSS Eur F213/89, General Whittingham, 'Confidential: Letter and Memoir on the means of attack by Russia on British India...'.
³⁷ MSS Eur F213/89, General Whittingham, 'Confidential: Letter and Memoir on the means of attack by Russia on British India...'.
³⁸ L/PS/3/12, W. H. Sykes, 21 June 1842, p. 553.
³⁹ Hanifi, 'Impoverishing a colonial frontier', 206-7.

Government correspondence on the matter and deliberately highlighted those aspects demonstrating that fears of Russia lay behind the decision. It was generally perceived, by the Court that these fears were exaggerated, but this mattered less than proving their relevance in the decision to go to war.

These debates together subsumed the local perspectives that highlighted the superficial and tendentious understandings of the Afghan polity that had attended the policy debates prior to the start of the campaign. Meanwhile the elevation of the Russian aspect, either to sustain further military investment, or to buttress claims over financial liabilities for the disaster, provided ample material for future historians who advocated great game narratives, at the cost of these local perspectives.

The Emergence of a Violent Geography

The catastrophe of 1842 had a profound impact on British perceptions of Afghanistan itself with the emergence of a particular rendering of the country as a 'violent geography'.⁴⁰ This representation had multiple sources. Demonstrating the power of local information systems once more, officials in India first heard of the disasters through Hindu bankers in the bazaars of Delhi.⁴¹ By the time the message had reached London, a powerful narrative of Afghan subterfuge had taken hold. Communicating the 'fearful' intelligence, the President of the Board of Control informed the fledgling Queen Victoria that a 'very great' number of 'valuable officers' had fallen, 'the victims of a widespread conspiracy which seems to have embraced within its confederation, the most warlike tribes of the Affghan nation'.⁴² The Governor-General, making a public declaration on the disaster in the *London*

⁴⁰ Gregory and Pred (eds.), *Violent Geographies*.

⁴¹ This appears to have been a result of the desperate attempts by the British to secure cash advances in order to bribe the Ghilzai tribes into allowing the British safe passage from the country. This banking network that reached from Kabul to Delhi and across north India would be later put to use by the British to negotiate a ransom for a group of prisoners held in Afghanistan. Hanifi, 'Impoverishing a colonial frontier', 206-7; Bayly, *Empire and Information*, 140.

⁴² IOR/L/PS/3/11, Part 3, Fitzgerald to Queen Victoria, 8 February 1842, p. 559.

Gazette, reported a 'faithless enemy, stained by the foul crime of assassination' and driven by 'consummate treachery'.⁴³ This perceived united effort prompted defiance in many. Major Lynch, who had been discredited for his failure to warn of the crisis was particularly vitriolic: 'Half measures will not do for the Afghans', he declared, 'the more vigorous they are the sooner will affairs improve and as in all probability every chief of a tribe in the country has committed himself and proved a traitor ... they should on evidence of their guilt be blown away from a gun or hung on being apprehended. The peasants are harmless without these treacherous rascals to head them'.⁴⁴

Motivating such discussions over the possible response to the disaster was the fear of the damage to British prestige, driven in turn by the ever-present paranoia of rumour and subversion, now at heightened levels as some observers sensed a wider 'alienation and disaffection'.⁴⁵ Typically this manifested itself in fears of a pan-Islamic conspiracy. *The Times* correspondent in Constantinople reported its spreading impact on Muslim opinion noting that 'it has been asserted on more than one occasion by Turkish authorities that the late reverses of England had suddenly reduced her to the place of a third-rate power'.⁴⁶ Yet, the myth of a united front opposing the British was also used as an argument against the sending forth of an 'Army of Retribution'. As one advisor to the EIC warned, the British would only leave once more 'redefeated and rehumiliated': 'Disunited tribes were combined against us when the name of England was encircled with a halo of uninterrupted success. The spell of our invincibility has been broken and great catastrophes have been brought upon us by no equal foe'.⁴⁷ This perception of a wider conspiracy also led to questions over the reliability of the 'Afghan' regiments recruited into the Indian services from the diasporic

⁴³ IOR/PS/3/12, London Gazette, 5 April 1842, p. 644.

⁴⁴ IOR/L/PS/3/13, 'Minute on the policy which should now be pursued in Afghanistan', p. 627.

⁴⁵ IOR/L/PS/3/11, Part 3, George Tucker, 'Notes on Affghanistan Affairs', 18 March 1842, p. 650.

⁴⁶ Stewart, *On Afghanistan's Plains*, 92.

⁴⁷ IOR/PS/3/12, David Ross of Bloomsbury to Lord Fitzgerald, 2 May 1842, p. 713

communities in north India, including the 'Rohilla Pathans'.⁴⁸ The government was advised accordingly that any future force sent to Afghanistan 'must be upon a scale of great magnitude, and ... a large proportion must consist of Europeans, more incurred to a cold climate'.⁴⁹ Added to this was a new sense of impenetrability describing the geography of Afghanistan; 'a rugged, barren, and unhospitable [sic] country',⁵⁰ locked away behind the gauntlets of the mountain passes, its snows 'dyed' by the blood of British subjects 'to which it is to be feared new victims have been added which has left their unburied bodies to decompose and add pestilence to the mountain difficulties opposed to our advancing columns'.⁵¹

Meanwhile, the ability to exact retribution on the man who was blamed for the murder of Macnaghten, Akbar Khan, was questioned. As George Tucker, the President of the Board of Control who opposed a further intervention, warned: 'A Nation cannot wage war against an Individual; nor can a whole people be made liable for individual crimes. We have not in this case a civilized Government to deal with which would, no doubt, be justly responsible for political offenses [sic] and for wrongs and outrages committed against unoffending parties in violation of the public law.'⁵² In emphasizing the impossibility of legal reciprocity with an 'uncivilized' power, Tucker was drawing upon a key trope in the representation of what Gerry Simpson has called an 'outlaw state': 'the idea that states can be differentiated in law according to their moral nature, material and intellectual power, ideological disposition or cultural attributes'.⁵³ By casting the Afghan 'state' beyond the pale of civilized legal provisions, exceptional measures could be justified that relinquished the intervening power of any responsibility for the recognition of those legal norms that would normally apply to 'civilized' states.

⁴⁸ IOR/L/PS/3/11, Part 3, George Tucker, 'Notes on Affghanistan Affairs', 18 March 1842, p. 638-9.

⁴⁹ IOR/L/PS/3/11, Part 3, George Tucker, 'Notes on Affghanistan Affairs', 18 March 1842, p. 639.

⁵⁰ IOR/L/PS/3/11, Part 3, George Tucker, 'Notes on Affghanistan Affairs', 18 March 1842, p. 641.

⁵¹ IOR//PS/3/12, W. H. Sykes, 21 June 1842, p. 568-9.

⁵² IOR/PS/3/11, Part 3, George Tucker, 'Notes on Affghanistan Affairs', 18 March 1842, 661-2.

⁵³ Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States*.

This state of legal exception was often a post-hoc rationalisation for brutality, and the status of 'uncivilized' was generally presumed in the South Asian setting, but the rationale was now more explicit. As Tucker declared: 'An outrage has been committed which, under the laws and usages of civilized nations, would call for full reparation, and in the last resort, justify an appeal to Arms. But we have placed ourselves among a semi-barbarous people ... and they have avenged themselves in their own way, by acts of great atrocity. But how are they to be punished?'⁵⁴ The exact nature of the 'punishment' was to be determined, yet the projection of uncivilized and violent representations onto the Afghan space would have profound consequences for the manner in which the British would engage with Afghanistan over the coming decades, and would determine Afghanistan's legal status within wider notions of global order as defined by imperial powers at this time. The concept of a violent geography was therefore closely linked to the elaboration of a particular legal status afforded to the Afghan polity.

Great Power Management and Regional Diplomacy

Beyond actions in Afghanistan, the initial stages of the Anglo-Afghan war had wider implications for regional diplomacy, with the new reach of British military power presenting an opportunity for the crafting of a new sovereign order in the region. Anglo-Persian diplomacy at this time demonstrates how the British lost little time in taking advantage of this opportunity. Prior to the invasion of Afghanistan, the British had demanded Persian withdrawal from Herat and Ghorian to the west. On 3 July 1841, with both demands met, the Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, announced that diplomatic relations were to be normalised and the British envoy, John McNeill, was ordered to return to Tehran for the signing of a new commercial treaty. The Persian Gulf island of Kharg, which had been occupied by British troops as a coercive

⁵⁴ IOR/PS/3/11, Part 3, George Tucker, 'Notes on Affghanistan Affairs', 18 March 1842, p. 660-1.

measure, was to be evacuated upon the signing of this new treaty.⁵⁵ The British were attempting to establish Herat as a new diplomatic thoroughfare between India and Tehran, with the new treaty to confer the right for the British to appoint a consul at Tehran who would be enabled to communicate with EIC agents to be established at Khiva, Kokan, and Bokhara.⁵⁶ Herat would accordingly resemble a forward operating base for Company power. This made strategic sense, placating British fears of a Russian armed advance through what was viewed as the most likely route into Afghanistan. But it also made commercial sense, with Herat representing a key node in the merchant networks extending north towards markets in Central Asia.⁵⁷ As such Herat was envisaged as a new Ludhiana.

Through these diplomatic efforts the British were also attempting to impose a new spatial order on the region. The Perso-Afghan border had long been a site of sovereign contestation, a status rendered in part by the close religious and cultural affinities between Persian communities and those of Herat – notably through a shared adherence to the Shi’a sect of Islam.⁵⁸ But the British occupation was also driving Shah Kamran and Yar Muhammad Khan, the rulers of Herat, to seek Persian support. In early 1841 the *Sadr-e-Azam*⁵⁹ of Persia, Haji Mirza Aghasi had called upon Palmerston and the British to follow their own ‘liberal and enlightened policy’ and recognize the allegiance of the Afghans to Persia and the sovereignty of the Shah over Afghanistan’s territory.⁶⁰ In response Palmerston instructed his envoy to inform Aghasi that Afghanistan ‘shall remain separate and distinct from Persia’.⁶¹ His successor, Lord Aberdeen, followed suite, advising Sheill to avoid any

⁵⁵ IOR/PS/3/10, Palmerston to McNeill, 3 July, 1841, p. 169-193.

⁵⁶ IOR/PS/3/10, Palmerston to McNeill, 3 July, 1841, p. 169-193; IOR/PS/3/11, Part 1, p. 9-19. The treaty was eventually signed on 28 October 1841.

⁵⁷ Adler, ‘The Key to India?’, 186-209.

⁵⁸ Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*; Hopkins and Marsden, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*, Chapter One.

⁵⁹ Prime Minister (roughly)

⁶⁰ Haji Mirza Aghasi referred to documents sent by Sher Muhammad Khan, the former Sirdar of Peshawar, to support this, claiming that they showed ‘the Affghans themselves confessedly avow that the whole of Affghanistan and its territorial dependencies, with all the tribes wandering therein, do exclusively belong to the Kingdom of Persia, and are the subjects of his present Majesty the Shah’. IOR/PS/3/10, p. 228-9.

⁶¹ IOR/PS/3/10, Palmerston to Sheil, 15 June 1841, p. 151.

communication 'on the subject of our relations with the various Affghan Chiefs, and especially with Kamran Shah [sic]; and to endeavour to inspire the latter with confidence in our disposition to be on good terms with him, and thus lead him to abstain from looking for foreign support'.⁶²In truth, the British were at least partially aware of the ambiguity of Herat's status at this time. Successive British explorers had averred to Persian claims to western Afghanistan, including Arthur Conolly who had, in his 1834 travel account, suggested that the city constituted part of Persian Khorasan.⁶³ In driving a wedge between Persia and Afghanistan, and setting up Herat as a nominally 'independent state', the British were therefore knowingly establishing a more fixed sovereign order in the region.

Yet the British were also aware of the illusion of control that their presence in Herat carried. Whilst cities across the region, and to an extent the commercial routes in between, were seen as limited domains of order, Aberdeen was explicit in his doubt that a British occupation in Herat 'could by the mere influence of its presence in that place, reduce to order the unruly bands whom natural feeling, religious bigotry, and long cherished habits of rapine would prompt to resist the invader, and to endeavour to expel him from their country'.⁶⁴ But there was also concern that such a presence would provide a pretext for the stationing of Russian troops in the states of Central Asia, including Khiva. In combination with the 'unruly tribes' of Herat, it was feared this would leave the British in a vulnerable position should Russia 'be so disposed, to incite the various tribes of Central Asia to make common cause against British influence and power'.⁶⁵ The violent geography was accordingly viewed as a potential strategic threat, and connected with wider paranoia relating to the volatility of the Muslim populations across the region.

⁶² IOR/PS/3/11, Part 1, Aberdeen to McNeill, 18 October 1841, p. 96.

⁶³ The cartographer John Cary (1801) as well as the travellers John MacDonald Kinneir (1815) and James Baillie Fraser (1834) all expressed this view. Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*, 30-1; Conolly, *Journey*, Vol. II, 3.

⁶⁴ IOR/PS/3/11, Part 1, Aberdeen to McNeill, 18 October 1841, p. 97.

⁶⁵ IOR/PS/3/11, Part 1, Aberdeen to McNeill, 18 October 1841, p. 96.

This fear of Russian influence has tended to encourage the perception of Anglo-Russian competition in the region, but this obscures the surprising levels of cooperation between the two imperial powers that was evident during this period, particularly concerning Persia. Amongst the topics of discussion in St Petersburg at this time between the British Ambassador and the Russian Foreign Minister, Count Nesselrode, were the status of British forces on Kharg; the nature of Anglo-Persian relations with respect to Herat; as well as the formulation of the new Anglo-Persian commercial treaty.⁶⁶ In addition to a non-intervention agreement, this draft Anglo-Persian treaty included a stipulation in which Persia and Britain would commit to use all influence against Shah Kamran, and Shah Shuja to discourage 'intrigues' or 'other hostile acts'.⁶⁷ Throughout these events, the Russian government was kept informed through diplomatic correspondence with the British in St Petersburg. The Emperor even warned the British Minister and the Russian Minister in Tehran, General Duhamel, over their trust in diplomatic measures, describing the Persian government as 'the most perfidious if not one of the weakest under the sun'.⁶⁸

The management of Persian territory and space was an endeavour that Britain and Russia had a shared interest in, indeed both powers had recently engaged in military confrontations with Persia, and both viewed the frontiers of the former Persian Empire as within their purview of imperial authority.⁶⁹ This did not remove the competitive element. Partly in response to the British invasion of Afghanistan in 1839, Russian troops moved into Khiva shortly afterwards only to suffer heavy losses as troops fell victim to the winter weather. But the narrative behind this venture exhibited a shared imperialist outlook with Britain. The Emperor, it was claimed in a public

⁶⁶ IOR/PS/3/10, Bloomfield to Palmerston, 6 September 1841, p. 383-5; PS/3/11, Part 1, p. 179-215; p. 217-21.

⁶⁷ Articles VI and VII, which stipulate for each power to use influence on respective parties 'pour le forcer a renoncer a toute espeece d'intrigues ou a d'autre actes d'hostilité'. IOR/PS/3/11, Part 1, p. 218-9.

⁶⁸ IOR/PS/3/11, Part 2, de Rothsay to Aberdeen, 17 January 1842, p. 283.

⁶⁹ Russia and Persia had been engaged in intermittent conflict over the Caucasus between 1804-1813, ending with the British-mediated Treaty of Gulistan in 1813. In the second Perso-Russian war of 1826-8 the Persians briefly reclaimed the territories ceded to Russia in this treaty, only to be pushed back and sue for peace after the Russians took Tabriz. The conflict ended with the signing of the Treaty of Turkmanchai in 1828.

manifesto, had acted to 'put an end to robbery and exaction, to deliver those Russians who are detained in slavery, to make the inhabitants of Khiva esteem and respect the Russian name, and finally, to strengthen in that part of Asia the lawful influence to which Russia has a right'.⁷⁰ This was more than mere window-dressing. The British and the Russians did not simply view these domains as possessing strategic value, but afforded a moral virtue to their actions in annexing such territories as resembling the spreading of commerce, law, and civilization.

This was a powerful image, one that had already been evoked in some of the travel narratives that were now in high demand in Britain and elsewhere. Godfrey Vigne was perhaps one of the more evangelical in his expression of this motive. Although he was not optimistic of Russian chances amidst the 'wild children' of the desert, and their co-religionists in Bokhara,⁷¹ and he was certainly not naïve as to the strategic motives behind such moves, Vigne nonetheless viewed this growing Russian influence positively. He saw the Khiva campaign as inflicting 'the penalty of adopting the semblance of humanity' on the 'savage plunderers and bigots of the Asiatic deserts', thereby doing the 'civilized world' a favour.⁷² Vigne was not alone in these views. Arthur Conolly, who has repeatedly been identified as the originator of the term 'great game' shared this evangelizing worldview. As Gerald Morgan points out: 'In his view the great game was a spiritual and anti slavery crusade'.⁷³ Conolly proposed that Britain 'should help Russia cordially to all that she has a right to expect – unify Afghanistan, shake hands with Persia ... [and] civilize and christianize [sic] the rest of the region.'⁷⁴ These civilizing narratives describing Russian activities prompted a flicker of recognition from the British perspective, lending an air of familiarity to the Russian cause, and describing their actions in terms that the British could relate to, viewing

⁷⁰ Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 380.

⁷¹ Referring to Alexander Burnes' work he noted that Bokhara was 'the centre of Islam', and whilst the Turkomen were less zealous, and the Khirghiz had 'but a confused idea of the religion of the Prophet', they would nonetheless combine against 'infidel' Russians. Vigne, *A Personal Narrative*, 450-2.

⁷² Vigne, *A Personal Narrative*, 469.

⁷³ Morgan, 'Myth and Reality in the Great Game', 55.

⁷⁴ Morgan, 'Myth and Reality in the Great Game', 55.

as they did, their own activities in Afghanistan and on frontiers elsewhere as motivated by similar imperatives. In Vigne and Conolly's more pacific vision the conquest of the frontier states of Russia and British India presented an opportunity to once and for all bring the region back from the despair of anarchy, despotism and violence, and into the fray of modernity. Fratricide, plunder, and rapine could be suppressed through trade, and with it, the tyrannies of a violent disposition would give way to commerce and good governance all under the baleful gaze of great power paternity. The frontier would remain an ambiguity, but a pacific ambiguity, tempered by its new role as a commercial thoroughfare.⁷⁵

From the British perspective, one reading of Russia's Central Asian activities was to view them as a proving ground for Russia's own claims to 'civilizational' status - at least according to British definitions. Speaking on the projected Russian conquest of Central Asia in 1830, Lord Haytesbury, the British Ambassador to St Petersburg had declared Russia to be 'too far behindhand in civilisation ... to allow the entertainment of such a project for many, many years to come'.⁷⁶ This had now changed. Furthermore, Russia's stated goals of exploring commercial activities, as well as rescuing Central Asian peoples (including Russian citizens) from enslavement through the overthrow of despotic rulers, accorded well with British views on the duties of civilized powers. Indeed in the aftermath of the Russian expedition on Khiva the British representative in Herat, Major D'Arcy Todd, dispatched Lieutenant Richmond Shakespear to track down the outcome of an earlier fact-finding mission. Shakespear used this opportunity to negotiate the release of a group of Russian slaves, who were duly delivered back to the

⁷⁵ In the closing pages of his account Vigne, whipped into a frenzy of Alexandrian nostalgia, concludes with the hope that commercial endeavour would tame the acquisitive urges of empires: that 'the good faith observable in the more honourable transactions of private life be introduced into those of a public nature, and we may soon hope to see the time when, by means of a chain of posts, steamboats, and railroads, (by which no fox-hunting will be spoiled), the overland journey, by way of St. Petersburg or Warsaw, will become the quickest and most approved mode of travel between London and Calcutta.' Vigne, *A Personal Narrative*, 472.

⁷⁶ Martin Ewans, *Securing the Indian Frontier in Central Asia: Confrontation and negotiation, 1865-95* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 2.

Russian garrison to the north.⁷⁷ This perception of a shared humanitarian purpose was boosted with high-level Russian diplomatic assistance in the failed attempts to free the unfortunate Captain Stoddart, a British officer who had been imprisoned, along with Conolly, by the Amir of Bokhara whilst exploring the Central Asian states north of the Hindu Kush.⁷⁸ The assistance in these efforts of the Russian explorer Colonel Bouténieff, who had been on a 'scientific' mission to Bokhara - much in the mould of earlier European explorations of Afghanistan - further highlighted the benefits of common imperial endeavours in the field of the sciences and exploration.⁷⁹

With the failure of the Russian expedition to Khiva, and the later British withdrawal from Kabul, Anglo-Russian relations met on the common ground of military failure. The subsequent killing of Conolly and Stoddart, which met with much publicity in England further cemented the vague vision of disorder and violence that described the perception of the region as a whole, from both St Petersburg and Calcutta. More than that, the British and Russians had shared views on the inescapable logic to their conquest of these spaces. The British failures of 1842 elicited sympathy from the Russian Emperor who remarked to the British Ambassador 'I perceive that you are precisely suffering under the same embarrassments which annoy me, that the extent of country you occupy renders it almost necessary that you should go further, and that you find it equally inconvenient to advance, to withdraw, or to remain in your present position'.⁸⁰ This logic of self-perpetuating imperial expansion had certainly been in evidence amongst some of the military commentaries on the consolidation of the occupation of Afghanistan,⁸¹ and was now acknowledged at a diplomatic level to be a dilemma of great power expansion in the region.

⁷⁷ Johnson, *Spying for Empire*, 85.

⁷⁸ IOR/L/PS/3/10, Lord Stuart to Aberdeen, 9 November 1841, p. 499; IOR/L/PS/3/13, Bloomfield to Aberdeen, 27 August 1842, p. 6-7.

⁷⁹ The news of their capture was communicated through the Colonel, IOR/L/PS/3/12, p. 169-71; IOR/L/PS/3/10, Lord Stuart to Aberdeen, 9 November 1841, p. 499.

⁸⁰ IOR/L/PS/3/11, Part 2, de Rothsay report, 22 February 1842, p. 396.

⁸¹ General Whittingham's aforementioned memo provides an example, MSS Eur F213/89, General Whittingham, 'Confidential: Letter and Memoir on the means of attack by Russia on British India...'. See also IOR/L/PS/3/10, Lieut-Colonel Jervis, 'Memoir on the Defence of the North-Western Frontier of India in Consequence of the Later Operations on the Indus', p. 865.

This additional shared Anglo-Russian imperialist outlook on the perils of the ambiguous cartography between their territorial possessions complemented the established views on the duties of civilized powers with respect to uncivilized states, and offered further space for mutual understanding. The Emperor went on to suggest 'some general system of occupation ... grounded upon an actual state of possession which may be conclusive ... it appears convenient that we now understand our relative position, and what has hitherto been a closed subject may now be discussed openly between us'.⁸² Indeed, in response to this the British government thanked the Russians for the 'friendly conduct' of their Ambassador at Tehran who had intervened to warn Persia of the 'danger of interference in the affairs' of Afghanistan during the 1842 withdrawal.⁸³ The British would return the favour in coordinating with the Russians over Persian activities on their restive frontier with Khiva.⁸⁴

A key manifestation of joint endeavours at this time also includes the arbitration of the Ottoman-Persian frontier, which was overseen by a collaborative boundary commission of British and Russian officials established in 1840 at the invitation of Persia and Turkey.⁸⁵ The commission reported in 1843, which led to the signing of the Erzurum Treaty in 1847, and the readjustment of borders in 1849. It was a reminder that the management of frontiers was considered a duty of great powers in the nineteenth century, and indeed into the twentieth, but it also highlighted the common sense of duty that these powers had in spatially constraining those states they considered to be unruly.⁸⁶

As Colonel Jervis noted: 'We have abandoned the eligible position formerly occupied as a north-western frontier, and advanced so far beyond it that we cannot again fall back and rest on it, either with honour or safety'.

⁸² IOR/L/PS/3/11, Part 2, de Rothsay report, 22 February 1842, p.396-7.

⁸³ IOR/L/PS/3/11, Part 2, Aberdeen to McNeill, 24 March 1842, p. 458; IOR/L/PS/3/12, de Rothsay to Aberdeen, 22 March 1842, p. 20.

⁸⁴ IOR/L/PS/3/12, de Rothsay to Aberdeen, 22 March 1842, p. 24; IOR/L/PS/3/13, Aberdeen to Fitzgerald, 26 October 1842, p. 217-20.

⁸⁵ Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*, 24-8.

⁸⁶ The adjudication of the French, as well as the British and Russians, in boundary disputes added to the sense of great power trusteeship over this region. Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*, 28.

Perhaps even more telling was Anglo-Russian cooperation over the successor to the Shah of Persia. Prior to his death the British had reached an agreement with the Russians that the Prince Royal would accede to the throne on the death of his father, with the young Prince being supported by a Regent or *vizier*⁸⁷ also agreed upon in advance. Two individuals – Rehman Mirza, and Yusuf ul Dowlah – were considered for this role with the latter being seen as more favourable to Russian interests. Though as the Foreign Office remarked in 1848 ‘our preference ... is not so strong as to induce us to ... depart from the understanding formerly come to with the Russian Government’⁸⁸, in short, Anglo-Russian relations came first. This was reiterated the following year when Palmerston instructed his envoy to communicate the wish to the Russian government that ‘British and Russian agents in Persia should act in unison’ and that ‘H.M. Minister at Tehran will always be ready to enter into communication with the Russian Minister at Tehran, and to act in concert with him’.⁸⁹

These were not simply isolated examples indicating a counter-narrative to the prevailing view of Anglo-Russian competition. Nor were they simply cosmetic acts of cooperation designed to mask wider aggressive measures. Rather the pattern of Anglo-Russian engagement at this time demonstrates a wider logic in the role of great powers concerning those domains they considered to be inferior and even ‘fair game’ for expansionist policies. Meanwhile, cooperation over policies in Persia at times amounted to an international trusteeship of imperial powers over Persian territorial sovereignty. The nature of this cooperation did not just demonstrate a concern with coordinating their security to avoid misunderstandings, but exhibited a belief that some states were more capable of what they considered to be the norms of civilized diplomatic intercourse. This was a status that more ‘rude’, ‘uncivilized’, even ‘barbarous’ states such as Khiva,

⁸⁷ Roughly equivalent to the position of Prime Minister.

⁸⁸ IOR/L/PS/3/27, Foreign Office to Lt Col Tarrant, 24 October 1848, p. 180-1.

⁸⁹ IOR/L/PS/3/28, Palmerston to Andrew Buchanan, 20 March 1849 p.104; Palmerston to Sheil, 6 August 1849, p.269.

Bokhara, Herat, and Afghanistan were not considered to have reached. As such, sovereignty was not only divisible, in the sense that British and Russian reserved the right to interfere in sovereign responsibilities on behalf of those states; but it was also stratified. Different states were afforded differing degrees of sovereignty, based partly on perceptions of their 'civilised' status. The impact of the first Anglo-Afghan war on British perceptions not only resulted in a firm policy of non-intervention, but decisively placed Afghanistan beyond the pale. The policy of non-intervention was motivated by financial concerns but served to sustain this projected image of disorder and violence as well. As such non-intervention and the representation of a violent geography were mutually sustaining, feeding off each other.

'Sullen quiescence': Anglo-Afghan Relations 1842-52

The withdrawal of British troops in 1842 did not signal the immediate collapse of Shah Shuja's rule. In a further demonstration of the fluidity in alliances at this time, the nominal leader of the insurrection, Nawab Muhammad Zaman Khan, agreed to serve as a minister under Shah Shuja despite his own claims to the throne as the nephew of Dost Muhammad Khan. The military commander, Muhammad Akbar Khan, who was leading the siege of Jalalabad against the expelled British forces sought to mobilize the *ulama* in the rural areas against the British and pressured Shah Shuja to declare *jihad*. After two months Shuja finally agreed but having gathered his troops in the field on the outskirts of Kabul he was assassinated by the son of Zaman Khan, Shuja al-Daula Khan, on 5 April 1842.⁹⁰ Kabul politics was once more in a process of flux as Shah Shuja's son Fatih Jang succeeded to the throne, but his political power was soon subsumed by the returning Muhammad Akbar Khan who became *vizier* until the returning British army unseated him. Fatih Jang fled with the retreating British, his brother Shahpur briefly taking the throne before being replaced by Muhammad Akbar Khan. Within a few months, Dost Muhammad Khan had returned to Kabul, having been liberated

⁹⁰ Noelle, *State and Tribe*, 52.

from his pension under the British in Ludhiana. He reclaimed his throne from his son in the spring of 1843.

Anglo-Afghan relations at this time were, perhaps unsurprisingly, almost non-existent. The humiliation of the British, and their attendant fear of Afghan opinion towards any suggestion of their involvement in Afghan affairs drove a resilient policy of non-intervention. As a later Governor-General Lord Dalhousie put it, relations during the 1840s and early 1850s were of 'sullen quiescence on either side, without offence, but without good will or intercourse'.⁹¹ In their need for up to date information, and in the absence of more official channels, the British were forced to revert to an improvised system of native informants, including political exiles, merchants, traders, and various passing notables, as well as *akhbarat*.⁹² These offered glimpses of internal affairs but were typically vague on details and tended to convey a sense of impending unrest.

Emboldened by the greater credibility he now enjoyed as having resisted the British, Dost Muhammad Khan began a period of consolidation. This was not always clear to the British however. As one north-west frontier agent reported in 1844, '[o]n the whole the authority of Dost Mahomed Khan would appear to have in some degree taken root at least in the neighborhood of Caubul and in the larger valleys. No one of the chiefs is singly able to oppose him while their mutual jealousies prevent a combination against him. ... It is not however improbable that the advancing season may awaken the tribes from their present torpor and that a contest may take place for the possession of Caubul between the Ghilzyes and the Dooranees.'⁹³ Somewhat ironically, the British intervention and the legacy of their support for a centralised government under Shah Shuja proved partially beneficial to Dost Muhammad Khan's authority. The reduced authority of competing Durrani tribal leaders, the disciplining of military forces, and the importation of

⁹¹ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan' [British relations with since 1838], Adolphus Warburton Moore, Political and Secret Department, 31 August 1878, p. 7.

⁹² News, or newsletters.

⁹³ NAI, Foreign Department Proceedings 1840-49, Secret Consultations, 23 March 1834, p. 559-61.

bullion all proved advantageous.⁹⁴ Nonetheless, he faced a significant decrease in his territorial authority. In order to overcome this Dost Muhammad began his second period of rule by installing members of his family in the governorships of key constituencies. Kandahar reverted once more to the rule of the Amir's half brothers Kohendil Khan, Rahmdil Khan, and Mihrdil Khan. The heir-apparent, Muhammad Akbar Khan, became governor of Jalalabad, Laghman, and Hazarajat, (replaced by Ghulam Haidar Khan after his death in 1847). Bamiyan, Ghazni, Kohistan, Khost, Kurram, and Zurmat; as well as other regions surrounding Kabul were also allocated to the Amir's sons, and all enjoyed significant independence in their rule.⁹⁵ This dynastic base allowed Dost Muhammad Khan to begin a campaign reclaiming his influence north of the Hindu Kush in what the British referred to as Afghan-Turkestan from 1845 onwards.⁹⁶

Meanwhile the British were consolidating their rule in the Punjab. In a demonstration of the continued fixation with the Indus as a trade route, an army led by General Napier had, against the wishes of London, overthrown the Amirs of Sind in 1843. This action had been partially presaged by the use of Sind as a thoroughfare for the original army of the Indus, during which period Anglo-Sindi relations had been extremely tense. Further north, a succession crisis was consuming the Punjab following the death of Ranjit Singh in 1842. In the midst of this, the Sikh army crossed the Indus and invaded British occupied lands in 1845 sparking the first of the two Anglo Sikh Wars (1845-6 and 1848-9). By 1849 the British had annexed the Punjab and established six districts on what was now the 'frontier' of British India, and collectively known as Punjab Province: Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu, Hazara, Dera Ismail Khan, and Dera Ghazi Khan.⁹⁷ Two Commissionerships

⁹⁴ Noelle notes that the role of the Durrani nobility, and especially the Bamizai Popalzai, in the Kabul uprising was testament to the power they stood to lose under the reforming government of Shah Shuja. Noelle, *State and Tribe*, 55.

⁹⁵ Noelle, *State and Tribe*, 57-8.

⁹⁶ This is documented in IOR/L/PS/18/A5, 'Memorandum on Afghan-Turkistan' by J. Talboys Wheeler, Assistant Secretary to Government of India, in the Foreign Department (Calcutta, Officer of Superintendent of Government Printing, 1869).

⁹⁷ Hazara is to be distinguished from the Hazarajat in the Hindu Kush to the west of Kabul. Hazara was referred to as the only 'cis-Indus' district, as opposed to the 'trans-Indus'

administered the frontier, one for Peshawar and one for the Derajat. Each district was headed by a Deputy Commissioner.

The annexation of the Punjab had profound implications for Anglo-Afghan relations. On a practical level, British occupation allowed a conduit through which the latest information on Afghan affairs could be filtered, yet their reliance on an improvised indigenous information system encouraged an uneasy picture of instability that blended with an already violent concept of the Afghan polity itself. The fall of Jalalabad to Dost Muhammad Khan in 1848 nearly brought the Afghans into collision with the British once more. Afghan rumours that Queen Victoria had died and that 'the *Angrez* (English) were in confusion' fuelled ever-present fears of a rumour-driven uprising.⁹⁸ Intercepted communications between Dost Muhammad Khan and the Sikh resistance leader Chattar Singh, in which Afghan support for Sikh countermoves was to be traded for Peshawar, added to these fears. Shortly after this, the brief appearance of Afghan forces in the vicinity of Peshawar appeared to confirm a wider conspiracy, despite their retreat in the face of a British advance.⁹⁹

The newsletter system in particular was notoriously unreliable. Judging the validity of claims contained within them was often no more than a process of guesswork. In one instance Major Edwardes, who was at the time attempting to establish a base near Dera Ghazi Khan, was forced to validate a rumours relating to a *lashkar* siege of a nearby fort by comparing the news contained within two consecutive newsletters.¹⁰⁰ Despite this, officials were instructed to report all significant information up the chain of command. This rather holistic approach to intelligence gathering, combined with the tendency to fixate on moments of crisis, promoted a culture of fear that seemed to manifest itself on both sides of the frontier.

districts of the remaining five. Originally Dera Ismail Khan and Bannu had formed one district. Caroe, *The Pathans*, 330-1.

⁹⁸ Johnson, *Spying for Empire*, 89.

⁹⁹ Caroe, *The Pathans*, 332.

¹⁰⁰ IOR/L/PS/5/200, Edwardes to Lawrence, 7 February 1849, p. 335.

In the immediate aftermath of the Sikh surrender in 1849 many prominent British frontier officials assumed that an Afghan invasion was simply a matter of time. When a *harkara* correspondence between the Kandahar *sirdars* and the Nawab of Bahawalpur, appeared to demonstrate plans for a 'holy war' against the British, the Chief Commissioner at Peshawar was able to pass it off as an attempt at manipulation, largely due to the Nawab's protestations that it was a forgery.¹⁰¹ Nonetheless, Edwardes viewed such sedition as symptomatic of a wider conspiracy. Writing in response to the correspondence he warned 'I cannot agree with those who laugh at the idea of Candahar invasion. An invasion by Dost Mahomed was considered equally improbable a few months since, but we have lived to see it ... I consider a movement from Candahar if made in time, not only credible, but likely to be one greatly advantageous to their party.'¹⁰² Meanwhile in Afghanistan, in the aftermath of the Afghan withdrawal from Peshawar, a Kabul newsletter painted a picture of panic and division as businesses closed and Kabulis fled in anticipation of a British advance through the Khyber Pass.¹⁰³ In one instance, a dinner hosted by Dost Muhammad Khan was apparently broken up in disarray at rumours of British troops marching on Jalalabad.¹⁰⁴

This tense state of affairs buttressed a resolute practice of non-engagement from the British side and frontier officials were kept on a short leash when it came to Anglo-Afghan relations. The Governor-General had instructed frontier commissioners in May 1849 to 'abstain from any official communication of any description with the Affghan Monarch or any of his Chiefs without reference to Government.' 'No specific intimation of the intentions of the Government' were permitted 'privately or otherwise.'¹⁰⁵ But the prevailing view of Afghanistan as an originator of regional conspiracies meant that information on affairs at Kabul was demanded 'as frequently as possible'.¹⁰⁶ This tension between a will to know yet a

¹⁰¹ IOR/L/PS/5/200, Lawrence to Elliot, 9 March 1849, p. 340.

¹⁰² IOR/L/PS/5/200, Edwardes to Lawrence, 15 February 1849, p. 342.

¹⁰³ IOR/L/PS/5/201, Burn to Elliot, 25 May 1849, p. 108.

¹⁰⁴ IOR/L/PS/18/A5, 'Memorandum on Afghan-Turkistan', p. 52.

¹⁰⁵ IOR/L/PS/5/201, Burn to Elliot, 25 May 1849, p. 111.

¹⁰⁶ IOR/L/PS/5/201, Burn to Elliot, 25 May 1849, p. 111.

reluctance to engage rigidified the responses of officials and confused the appropriate diplomatic protocol. Therefore when overtures by an alleged messenger of Dost Muhammad Khan at Leia were made in late 1850 concerning the reopening of relations, the news prompted a series of correspondence between officials. Colonel Taylor, whose post at Dera Ismail Khan left him in the position of receiving occasional dispatches from Muhammad Azim Khan at Kandahar, proudly confirmed that he 'studiously avoided the slightest appearance of a too great willingness to receive the communications forwarded', but he admitted that the Governor-General had criticised his initial responses to these communications as too 'harshly worded' and for treating the messenger as a 'common cossid'.¹⁰⁷

Adding to the confusion was the sheer ambiguity regarding sovereign authority in the region. Despite the establishing of frontier posts on the west bank of the Indus, stretching from Hazara in the north to Dera Ghazi Khan in the south, the frontier did not end in a line of control but rather blurred into obscurity. At a local level the settled plains of the Indus valley were the only areas to which the British claimed any degree of authority. The 'mountaineers' were meanwhile left to their own devices, save the occasional punitive campaign. The territory in between was essentially undefined and viewed by the British as subject to neither their sovereign authority, nor that of Dost Muhammad Khan. As the noted British historian of the frontier, Olaf Caroe described it, this land was 'regarded as enjoying at least a factual independence, and was commonly referred to as *ghairilaqa* (unadministered territory) or *Yaghistan* (the land of the rebels) ... a belt of no-man's-land of unknown extent which acknowledged neither Kabul nor Calcutta as suzerain'.¹⁰⁸

Kabul was known to exert a tenuous grip over the principal measurable form of authority that the British referred to – that of collecting revenue – yet the capacity to do so did not correspond to the distance from the capital.

¹⁰⁷ Meaning messenger, runner, or post-carrier. IOR/L/PS/5/205, Burn to Elliot, 10 October 1850, p. 149.

¹⁰⁸ Caroe, *The Pathans*, 347.

Therefore the Waziris of Bannu, Khuttuck, and Khost, were known to pay tribute to Kabul despite being more remote than the Mohmands whose chief, Sadat Khan received a retainer from Kabul for ensuring the 'coming to terms' of his people.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, the inhabitants of the Khyber often appeared to the British as vacillatory in their loyalty, on one occasion eliciting a threat of retribution from the Amir should they 'from motives of avarice and worldly gain, open an intercourse with the English'.¹¹⁰ The expressions of loyalty to the Amir given by the Adam Khail Afridis, were even dismissed by Dost Muhammad Khan as being driven by 'worldly motives', 'the acquisition of wealth', and as merely seeking an allowance whilst 'falsely' stating that they were fighting for their religion.¹¹¹ Sovereign authority appeared to operate therefore, on the basis of affective ties, but in the absence of greater familiarity with the Afghan population, the British were forced to resort to more indirect methods in measuring sovereign influence, typically a crude recording by political officers of the 'chief' to whom the local tribe was loyal. Moreover, this disaggregated sovereign authority underscored the British view of frontier populations as essentially stateless collectives who were neither worthy of, nor expectant of treatment under the provisions of the norms of civilized society. This exceptionalist perspective was frequently evoked in cases where the British sought to evade the humanitarian principles they claimed to uphold elsewhere.

As such, this sovereign ambiguity left the door open for raiding campaigns at a moment's notice, often for the purposes of collective punishment in response to acts of brigandage. Such raids occasionally created friction as the ill-defined military influence of the British, and the affective ties that Kabul possessed over the tribes, overlapped. In late 1851 when British troops moved towards the Khyber Pass to construct an outpost at Michini, Captain Mackeson, the Commissioner at Peshawar, reported that Dost Muhammad Khan had informed his court that such a move by the British would be akin to 'building a fort at Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat, and would arm all the Affghan

¹⁰⁹ IOR/L/PS/5/213, p. 313; L/PS/5/218, Abstract of Jalalabad Newsletter, no date, p. 35.

¹¹⁰ IOR/PS/5/218, Kabul newsletter, (no date) 1853, p. 48.

¹¹¹ IOR/PS/5/218, Kabul newsletter, (no date) 1853, p. 49.

tribes against [them]'. He called upon the Afridi and Mohmand tribes to 'forget their former feuds and unite to give [the British] trouble'.¹¹² Such newsletter reporting continually filtered through the rickety information channels of the frontier areas, sustaining the impression that tribal uprisings were somehow linked to Kabul which was increasingly viewed as at the epicentre of regional disturbances and intrigue, exhibiting a nefarious influence that infected an entire region prone to sedition. Lieutenant General Sydney Cotton reflected this sentiment in his memoirs when he wrote on the assassination of the former Peshawar Chief Commissioner, Frederick Mackeson. This death, he asserted 'was originated by the evil machinations of our enemies, the whole border of our territory were interested more or less in the transaction, and the origin of the deed might perhaps have been traced to Cabul itself, had it been considered advisable'.¹¹³ Cotton submitted that he 'scarcely ever knew an instance in which it could not have been discovered ... that a deep-laid plot had originated the disaster, the assassin being simply and solely the instrument in the execution of it.'¹¹⁴

Such rumours played on British fears of administrative vulnerability. Indeed the rigidity of the decision-making structure was apparently known at Kabul. In 1853 newswriters reported that Dost Muhammad's Court was of the opinion that the British had not 'as yet settled the border tribes' in part because they 'were not able to act in any matter on their own responsibility ... they were obliged in all public affairs to report the circumstances to Government at Calcutta, and to abide by the instructions they thence received ... whether these orders were in accordance with their own views or not'.¹¹⁵ Despite these apparent vulnerabilities however, and indeed partially in response to them, the frontier was increasingly becoming the site of a peculiar form of bureaucratic management that sought to tame the paranoia of the administrative bodies in Calcutta. Before turning to this discussion, it is

¹¹² IOR/PS/5/209, Mackeson to Melville, 30 Jan 1852, p. 490.

¹¹³ Sydney Cotton, *Nine Years on the North-West Frontier of India, From 1854 to 1863* (London: Richard Bentley, 1868), 10. Cotton commanded the Frontier Force from 1854-1863.

¹¹⁴ Cotton, *Nine Years on the North-West Frontier of India*, 10.

¹¹⁵ IOR/PS/5/218, Kabul newsletter (no date) 1853, p. 47.

necessary to understand the manner in which this period of mutual distrust was partially overcome.

Overcoming Exception 1853-1857

The status of Herat had been a central concern in the lead up to the First Anglo-Afghan war, but in the climate of Anglo-Russian cooperation in the 1840s, especially relating to Persia, this paranoia was less pronounced. This was also partly a result of the greater sense of security that derived from what was becoming a permanent military presence on the frontier. Lord Palmerston, writing to the new British envoy in Tehran, Colonel Sheil, noted 'confidentially ... the possession of Scinde, of the Punjaub, and of Peshawur by Great Britain has in some degree diminished the importance which was formally attached to the question of Herat ... It is no doubt as true now as it was then, that the occupation of Herat by the Persians might under certain circumstances open the road to Herat to the Russians ... but our Indian frontier is now far stronger ... and we are therefore in a much better condition to wait for and to repel such an attack'.¹¹⁶ British actions were seemingly driven by a desire to remain uninvolved in the ongoing Perso-Afghan rivalry over the city, with Sheil's instructions from Palmerston 'not to make any specific threat which Her Majesty's Government might not be disposed afterwards to carry into execution'.¹¹⁷ Henry Rawlinson, at the time British Consul in Baghdad, shared these views. Should the Herat ruler Syed Muhammad Khan acknowledge himself 'a vassal of the Persian Crown' or even admit a Persian garrison, he claimed, 'the effect in British India would be absolutely imperceptible'.¹¹⁸ This was a position he shared with the President of the Board of Control. Sustaining these views had been an indication of favourable relations between Kabul and Herat. An alliance between Dost Muhammad Khan and Yar Muhammad Khan, agreed in 1846

¹¹⁶ IOR/L/PS/3/35, Palmerston to Sheil, September 1851, p. 118.

¹¹⁷ IOR/L/PS/3/35, Palmerston to Sheil, September 1851, p. 119.

¹¹⁸ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 6.

had been strengthened by shared endeavours to quell disturbances in Afghan-Turkestan.¹¹⁹

Colonel Sheil at Tehran (a former deputy of McNeil, the noted Russophobe and previous envoy), dissented from this view however and from 1846 had been dispatching a steady stream of memos warning of Persian designs on Herat and the threat of Russian influence that this carried.¹²⁰ When a further Persian attempt on Herat emerged in 1852 Sheil's perspective trumped the more relaxed attitude of Rawlinson and the Board of Control, prompting the Foreign Secretary (briefly under the Conservative tenure of Lord Malmesbury) to order a firm line and issue a vague threat, noting that the Persian government would be aware 'from what took place some years back that the British Government can easily cause its displeasure to be felt by Persia in a manner which may sensibly affect the material interests of that country'.¹²¹ The Persian troops were ordered back and a new Anglo-Persian treaty was signed in which Persia agreed to non-intervention in Herat unless the city was threatened from Kabul, or another 'foreign territory'.¹²²

However, the death in 1853 of the former ruler of Herat, Yar Muhammad Khan, who had been backing his son and nominal ruler Syed Muhammad Khan, signalled an end to the optimism. The city began 'sinking into anarchy',¹²³ and Syed Muhammad Khan, who was viewed in British accounts as 'an imbecile profligate',¹²⁴ was soon driven out by the apparent Persian sympathiser Muhammad Yusuf Khan, nephew of the former Saddozai Ruler of Herat Shah Kamran. The Kabul-Herat alliance collapsed as Muhammad Yusuf Khan began a campaign of intimidation against the nearby territories of Andkho and Shibargham, demanding they 'shake off' their allegiance to Kabul.¹²⁵

¹¹⁹ IOR/L/PS/18/A5, 'Memorandum on Afghan-Turkistan', p. 62.

¹²⁰ Alder, 'The Key to India?', 192-4.

¹²¹ Alder, 'The Key to India?', 195.

¹²² IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 7.

¹²³ IOR/L/PS/18/A5, 'Memorandum on Afghan-Turkistan', p. 78.

¹²⁴ IOR/L/PS/18/A5, 'Memorandum on Afghan-Turkistan', p. 78.

¹²⁵ IOR/L/PS/18/A5, 'Memorandum on Afghan-Turkistan', p. 78.

Meanwhile, in 1854 against the backdrop of the Crimean War, the fragile edifice of Anglo-Russian cooperation fell away. When rumours began to circulate of a Persian attempt on Turkey as a distraction in support of Russia, Colonel Sheil speculated that British troops might soon once more be called upon to occupy Kandahar as a bulwark against Persian and Russian inroads.¹²⁶ More optimistic voices moderated this fear, including Governor-General Lord Dalhousie who referred to the 'extreme improbability' of an attempt by Russia to invade India through Afghanistan.¹²⁷ Nonetheless, the ever-present fear of rumour destabilising the perception of British supremacy drove a sense of a need to overcome the 'reciprocal oblivion of past grievances' with Afghanistan.¹²⁸ Events in Afghanistan appeared to support the possibility of developing ties with Kabul. Dost Muhammad Khan had expanded his sphere of authority with the seizing of Kelat-i-Ghilzai between Kandahar and Kabul – a move that had prompted a letter of protest from Persia 'couched in the language of a Paramount Power'. Moreover, an insurrection in Balkh was driving the Amir to seek external support.¹²⁹

Overcoming the prevailing sense of Afghan 'exception' was eased by Afghan overtures. The Amir's son, Muhammad Azim Khan wrote to Edwardes in late 1854 requesting a British alliance. Meanwhile, the arrival of an envoy on 23 October in Peshawar carrying letters from Dost Muhammad Khan 'humble in ... tone and conciliatory in the extreme', permission was given for the signing of a treaty on 30 March 1855 pledging mutual non-interference and including the commitment that the Afghan Government would be the 'friend of the friends and the enemy of the enemies' of the East India Company.¹³⁰ The nature of this agreement was deliberately distant. The British sought only a 'community of interest' with Afghanistan.¹³¹ Further commitments, including an offensive treaty had been ruled out on the grounds that such terms would defeat the British object to 'abstain from any interference' in the 'interests

¹²⁶ IOR/L/PS/3/40, Sheil to Waddington, 'additional observations ... regarding the supposed intention of Persia to send an army to Afghanistan and to Bushire', (no date), p. 43.

¹²⁷ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 9.

¹²⁸ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 8.

¹²⁹ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 9.

¹³⁰ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 10.

¹³¹ Lord Dalhousie, IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 13.

and concerns' of the 'various states' beyond the British frontier.¹³² Moreover, the previous Anglo-Persian treaty prevented any British encouragement to the Afghan government in any designs it might have on Herat. The British were committed to the regional legal order they were attempting to construct through treaty agreements with the various states they saw across the region, in particular those agreements they had with the more stable and (according to British perceptions) more 'civilized' state of Persia. However, political realities on the ground continued to thwart these ambitions.

In late 1855 the British began to receive reports of further expansions by the Afghan Amir into Kandahar following the death of his brother and the *sirdar* Kohendil Khan. The newsletter report described this move as being invited by his remaining sons following a family feud over the management of government affairs, but Edwardes, who received the dispatch suggested instead that the Amir had been motivated by 'putting an end to the danger with which the Persian intrigues of his Candahar relatives have so long been threatening him'.¹³³ Whilst this apparent further consolidation of the Amir's kingdom accorded well with longer-term British hopes for a united Afghan polity, rumours of a further Persian attempt on Herat threatened to bring Afghan and Persian troops into a collision over Herat, leaving the British with potentially divided loyalties.¹³⁴

Throughout 1855 and into 1856, amid warming Anglo-Afghan relations, news of these renewed Persian attempts were now being passed to the British through indigenous Afghan information networks, notably the heir apparent, Ghulam Haider Khan, and his network of informants at Farrah and Lash Jowain, south of Herat.¹³⁵ The recent signing of a treaty agreement with the Khan of Kalat also instituted a *vakil* agreement through which the British could be kept informed of Persian movements.¹³⁶ Whilst these reports indicated a clear Persian influence in the ongoing political turmoil in Herat,

¹³² IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 12.

¹³³ IOR/L/PS/5/226, Edwardes to Temple, 1 October 1855, p. 494.

¹³⁴ IOR/L/PS/5/226, Temple to Beadon, 19 October, 1855, p. 498.

¹³⁵ IOR/L/PS/5/226, Edwardes to Temple, 11 October 1855, p. 500.

¹³⁶ IOR/L/PS/5/17, No. 31, 30 July 1856, p. 59.

the detail coming via the indigenous newswriters demonstrated the very personal nature of this 'intrigue'. As Edwardes noted, 'the whole account reads more like a studied "*Coup d'état*" than a successful "*Coup de main*"'.¹³⁷

With Dost Muhammad Khan now established at Kandahar he sought treaty recognition from the British of his new territorial reach asking for the inclusion of Kandahar in the previously signed 1855 treaty, and further signalling his intentions to make a move on Herat, expressing his wish to be guided by 'the advice of the English'.¹³⁸ Yet despite the clear interests the British had in a consolidated polity of Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat (as the Governor-General privately admitted)¹³⁹ the Home Government reiterated the policy of only recognising Dost Muhammad Khan as the *de facto* governor of Kandahar, and maintaining the independence of Herat, as stipulated in the Anglo-Persian treaty. This reticence reached right down to the Chief Commissioner of the Punjab who responded to the request with 'utmost caution' having been instructed that political correspondence with the Amir was to be left exclusively in the hands of the Governor-General.¹⁴⁰ There was a commitment to keeping the affairs of Herat, Persia, and Afghanistan separate, for fear of offending either side. Therefore, when Muhammad Yusuf, the new ruler of Herat requested a British envoy from Peshawar, the stern reply from Dalhousie was that this was 'out of the question', and that the mere 'fact of congratulations' would be 'unpalatable' to Dost Muhammad Khan'.¹⁴¹ Adding to this imperative, in the view of Calcutta were growing signs of Anglo-Afghan cooperation on the frontier, including indications that the Amir was 'curbing the Mohmand Tribes'.¹⁴² The key Afghan intermediary for the British, Ghulam Haider Khan, had also raised the prospect of a *vakil* arrangement between the British and the Afghans, a suggestion that offered

¹³⁷ IOR/L/PS/5/226, Edwardes to Temple, 11 October, 1855, p. 499.

¹³⁸ IOR/L/PS/5/17, Foreign Department to Secret Committee, No. 4, 22 January 1856, p. 7-8.

¹³⁹ See IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 18.

¹⁴⁰ IOR/L/PS/5/17, Foreign Department to Secret Committee, No. 4, 22 January 1856, p. 7-8.

¹⁴¹ IOR/L/PS/5/226, Governor General, 25 January 1856, p. 769.

¹⁴² IOR/L/PS/5/17, Foreign Department to Secret Committee, No. 25, 17 June 1856, p. 47.

to ameliorate the existing improvised newswriter system; this proposal was accepted by the Governor-General on 17 July 1856.¹⁴³

Unfortunately for the British their wish for a carefully delineated regional order did not match their institutional arrangements for diplomatic intercourse. In a remarkable failure to align actions, Charles Murray, the envoy at Tehran had, in early 1856, and in response to a request from Muhammad Yusuf Khan, recognised and congratulated him on his new position of authority at Herat, thereby contradicting the policy from Calcutta of keeping Persian, Herati, and Afghan affairs separate. Defending his actions to an outraged Governor-General, Murray insisted 'I viewed his Highness solely in the light of *de facto* (perhaps also *de jure*) ruler of Herat'. He argued that this presented no clash of interests at the time when he had not received news of Dost Muhammad's capture of Kandahar.¹⁴⁴ It was a striking example of the failings of the British information system in this region, but in a wider sense reflected how the ambiguity surrounding political authority in the region continued to complicate the interstate order that the British were attempting to establish through their diplomatic relations.

With news of a growing Persian troop presence near the city, in May 1856, the British Ambassador at Constantinople warned his Persian counterpart that the occupation of Herat was a 'distinct cause of quarrel'.¹⁴⁵ In September, a British military and naval force was despatched to the Persian Gulf and the British consuls at Tehran and Tabriz were ordered to leave.¹⁴⁶ Meanwhile, arms and ammunition were dispatched to the Khan of Kelat and also via the Bolan Pass to Dost Muhammad Khan at Kandahar.¹⁴⁷ With a greater volume of material now filtering down through the Punjab, frontier officials were receiving more details on the regional impact of Herat's precarious status. Information was sketchy, and not helped by flooding between Herat and

¹⁴³ IOR/L/PS/5/228, Edwardes to Temple, No. 37, 9 June 1856, p. 30-1; IOR/L/PS/5/17, Foreign Department to Secret Committee, No. 28, 17 July 1856, p. 53. Sir John Lawrence, the Chief Commissioner of the Punjab, was instructed to carry out and manage the proposal.

¹⁴⁴ IOR/L/PS/5/228, Murray to Edmunstone, 8 May 1856, p. 8.

¹⁴⁵ IOR/L/PS/19, 'Afghanistan', p. 15.

¹⁴⁶ IOR/L/PS/19, 'Afghanistan', p. 15.

¹⁴⁷ IOR/L/PS/5/17. Foreign Department to Secret Committee, Nos. 37 & 40, p. 71, p. 77.

Kandhar.¹⁴⁸ One such newswriter, Khan Bahadur Khan, who was embedded with the Amir's court at Kandahar fed through numerous reports replete with stories of intrigue and suspicion. The Persian presence at Herat seemed to be sending ripples though the delicately balanced loyalties of the chiefships in the territories between Herat and Kandahar, with some reports suggesting the previously loyal forts of Lash Jowain and Farah were now vacillating.¹⁴⁹ Whilst some suspected Russian machinations behind Persian moves, these newswriter reports offered no evidence of this,¹⁵⁰ and with regards to the paranoia of a move on Afghanistan the Chief Commissioner communicated to the Governor-General that there was nothing 'to indicate that this power is prepared to assist Persia with troops for such a design'.¹⁵¹

The more pressing concern that this information raised was the stability of the Afghan polity itself. Ever prone to rumour, the newswriter system had already thrown up news of Dost Muhammad Khan's death on 23 June, upon notice of which the Chief Commissioner's Secretary rather pessimistically prophesied that 'civil war and general confusion in Cabul may be anticipated'.¹⁵² Although this rumour turned out to be false, the Afghan polity was once again coming under scrutiny with a general pessimism over its cohesion especially in the event of an invasion. This analysis evoked the criteria that the British had used in the past to describe the Afghan political community. 'There can be little question', one official wrote, 'that many in Candahar and Cabul ... would join such invaders. For if the exiled Baruckzais have many enemies, they also have numerous friends and moreover it is well known that the Ameer's policy and administration have for some years been highly unpopular ... in a crisis, he could count on few steadfast adherents, with the exception of his own sons and their immediate followers.'¹⁵³ The

¹⁴⁸ L/PS/5/229, Acting Political Superintendent Upper Sind to Acting Commissioner, Upper Sind, 30 August, p. 2-4.

¹⁴⁹ IOR/L/PS/5/228, newsletter from Khan Bahadur Khan at Kandahar, (no date), p. 31-40.

¹⁵⁰ One newswriter, who had apparently travelled from Kandahar to Herat himself, reported 'There is not a single Russia with the Persian Troops and if any one says there is, he does not tell truth.' IOR/L/PS/5/230, Edwardes to James, 20 December 1856, p. 20.

¹⁵¹ IOR/L/PS/5/230, James to Edmunstone, 5 December 1856, p. 12.

¹⁵² IOR/L/PS/5/228, Temple to Edmunstone, 23 June 1856, p. 53.

¹⁵³ IOR/L/PS/5/230, H. R. James to Edmunstone, 5 December 1856, p. 12. See also IOR/L/PS/5/230, H. R. James to Edmunstone, 23 December 1856, p. 16.

British were partly led to this conclusion by the 'exiles' they were reliant upon for the news they received.¹⁵⁴ But it was becoming clear to the British that the stability of the Afghan polity was tenuous and rested on the authority of Dost Muhammad Khan.¹⁵⁵

At the end of 1856, continued Persian troop presence in Herat and the refusal of Tehran to heed British demands for their withdrawal led to a brief war between the two countries. Utilizing the island of Kharg in the Persian Gulf once more, the British landed troops at Bushire. In early 1857 in the midst of these hostilities, the British bolstered their existing agreement with Dost Muhammad Khan, offering financial assistance to aid his defence against Persia and proposing the stationing of British Officers at Kandahar to aid this. Both of these stipulations were only to last as long as hostilities ensued, therefore when Persian forces capitulated and withdrew from Herat in March 1857, British support also ended, despite a request from Dost Muhammad that it continue.¹⁵⁶ As such, the treaty was one of circumstance, not designed to establish a new status in Anglo-Afghan relations, but rather an expedient, designed to bolster Afghan defences against Persia. The Herat crises of the 1850s were providing a validation for the British of the dangers of diplomatic exchange with 'uncivilized states'. Meanwhile, the violent geography that informed British perceptions of Afghanistan, and was sustained by the frontier information system, advised against the expectation of such reciprocity from Kabul. The reticence that described interactions with Kabul was therefore not simply a hangover from the First Anglo-Afghan war and the violent geography that resulted from it, but was symptom of this wider diplomatic prejudice against such states. Central to this was the notion of reciprocity. Persian actions validated the belief that reciprocity was not to be expected from 'Mahommedan' states.

¹⁵⁴ An early example of such a source was Muhammad Mosin, son of Mirza Aga Jan, a former governor of Jalalabad, whose correspondence with a former member of Shah Shuja's retinue gave insight into the state of Kabul politics after the British annexation of the Punjab. See, IOR/L/PS/5/201, Burn to Elliot, 25 May 1849, p. 108.

¹⁵⁵ IOR/L/PS/5/230, H. R. James to Edmunstone, 18 December 1856, p. 97.

¹⁵⁶ The subsidy was discontinued in September 1858. IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p.21.

The distinction between *de facto* and *de jure* rulership was a further manifestation of an emergent positivist approach to the construction of international legal parameters, but it was also an example of the use of Law as tactic. There were diplomatic and strategic reasons for why legal recognition was often restricted to *de facto* recognition, but this status also cemented the essentially unstable view that the British had of 'uncivilized', 'barbarous' states. Legally binding treaties implied an international order, but the sense of subjugation that inhered within ever-present imperial visions of control over these 'lesser' states remained in the background. The fact that the British felt entitled to choose whether they recognized Afghan rulers *de jure* or *de facto*, demonstrated a perception that Afghan sovereignty was not subject to the same requirements of sovereign recognition as would ascribe to 'civilized' states.

Non-Intervention and the Bellew and Lumsden Mission 1857

The Anglo-Persian war compelled the British to overcome the sense of exclusion that had prevailed over their diplomatic relations with Afghanistan since 1842, but it did not alter the general character of that policy as one of non-intervention. However, the crisis was significant in forcing a reconsideration of pre-existing British policy towards Herat. As the new Governor-General Lord Canning outlined in a minute shortly after the signing of the new treaty with Dost Muhammad, whereas previously the British had sought an independent Herat that belonged 'neither to the Shah of Persia, nor to the Ameer of Cabul', this policy was now discredited as 'visionary and unobtainable'.¹⁵⁷ But if such were the case, then the prospect of a unified Afghan polity, including Herat, was equally visionary. Although Herat was judged to be 'Afghan and not Persian', the Governor-General believed that the idea 'that all Afghanistan should be united under one strong hand is probably not attainable at present; it is, indeed, nearly certain that with the death of

¹⁵⁷ IOR/L/PS/18/A3, 'Afghanistan and the policy to be pursued towards Herat', Minute by the Governor General, 5 February 1857, p. 3.

Dost Mahomed a further disruption will take place'.¹⁵⁸ Fearing that instability in Afghanistan was inevitable due to its inherently fissiparous political tendencies the policy became one of encouraging 'unity without intervention', the aim being to prove the goodwill of the British government by protecting Afghanistan from 'without' whilst not sending 'a single Englishman, armed or unarmed, into their country, except with their own good will'.¹⁵⁹

In fact, achieving this 'good will' for a mission was an additional important outcome of the treaty which included an agreement over the sending of a British expedition to Kandahar to oversee the dispensation of British military aid. The officer selected to lead the mission, Major Harry Lumsden, and his assistant Henry Bellew, were to be the first European officials in Afghanistan since the Anglo-Afghan War.¹⁶⁰ Besides their official role, they would also establish an intelligence thoroughfare for information from Herat, and provide a contingency should Persian troops advance on Afghanistan.¹⁶¹ Judging the quality of this information however was not always a simple task. As Bellew noted regarding possible Persian advances on Farah, 'the rumours daily current in the city [of Kandahar] were so conflicting, and yet at times so plausible, that it was difficult to discriminate between probable truth and falsehood.' Even the state of internal affairs was opaque with the death of Dost Muhammad Khan being 'periodically reported at intervals of a couple of months or so.'¹⁶²

But beyond this, the Lumsden and Bellew mission offered a valuable opportunity to ameliorate what one observer described as the 'extreme ignorance of the politics and popular feelings beyond the passes'.¹⁶³ This projection of a violent unknown geography was alluded to in the published

¹⁵⁸ IOR/L/PS/18/A3, 'Afghanistan and the policy to be pursued towards Herat', Minute by the Governor General, 5 February 1857, p. 3.

¹⁵⁹ IOR/L/PS/18/A3, 'Afghanistan and the policy to be pursued towards Herat', Minute by the Governor General, 5 February 1857, p. 3.

¹⁶⁰ H. W. Bellew, *Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan in 1857* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1862). For a list of European explorers who visited Afghanistan from 1843-1878 see Appendix 4.

¹⁶¹ Bellew, *Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan*, 224-6; 242.

¹⁶² Bellew, *Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan*, 242.

¹⁶³ IOR/L/PS/18/A3, 'Afghanistan and the policy to be pursued towards Herat', Minute by the Honourable J. P. Grant, 8 February 1857, p. 7.

account that followed in the wake of their trip. Bellew evocatively described the situation prior to their arrival as one in which 'ominous' accounts were being daily brought down to Peshawar relating 'court intrigues and dissensions now rife among the Amir's sons and the chiefs of the country'.¹⁶⁴ Since the 'worldwide notoriety' that the country had gained during 1838-42, Bellew recorded that Afghanistan had been 'shut out from the world, and, as it were, sunk in oblivion'.¹⁶⁵ Although he was ostensibly tasked with providing medical support to the mission, Bellew was able to establish a small clinic to the growing interest and suspicion of his hosts, playing on the exalted perception of European medicine, and thereby 'acquiring what information of the people and country the limited means at my disposal would permit of'.¹⁶⁶ This was particularly effective in gaining information from the Kandahar *sirdar* Kohendil Khan, whose recurrent problem with gout allowed a close relationship to build between the two men, much to the chagrin of the *sirdar's* Afghan physicians.¹⁶⁷

Harry Lumsden's role was of a far more military nature. This is certainly apparent in the unpublished material provided by Lumsden which included details concerning the geography along the route to Kandahar.¹⁶⁸ Upon arrival in Kandahar, Lumsden functioned as something of a proto-Defence Attaché, appraising the status of the Afghan troops stationed there. These assessments were typically unflattering, betraying a heavy dose of what Patrick Porter has termed 'military orientalism'.¹⁶⁹ This view was perhaps not aided by the unnerving habit of Afghan troop contingents to greet their guests dressed in reclaimed British uniforms left over from the Anglo-Afghan war, occasionally accompanied by renditions of 'God Save the Queen'.¹⁷⁰ Bellew reported in his account that 'the Afghan army is an armed, and, for the

¹⁶⁴ Bellew, *Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan*, 2.

¹⁶⁵ Bellew, *Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan*, 2.

¹⁶⁶ Bellew, *Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan*, 226.

¹⁶⁷ Bellew, *Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan*, 226; 234-5; 248.

¹⁶⁸ IOR/L/PS/5/230, James to Edmunstone, 6 April 1857, p. 287-98.

¹⁶⁹ Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War Through Western Eyes* (London: Hurst, 2009).

¹⁷⁰ These musical renditions, which included 'Rule Britannia', were rather ungratefully received as 'excruciating imitations'. Bellew, *Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan*, 113-4; 121; 128; 208.

most part, undisciplined mass, with divided and often conflicting interests, and, consequently, not at all times to be depended on for its fidelity to the king or his government.'¹⁷¹ Afghan troops were viewed as more adherent to their 'real masters', the tribal chiefs who were themselves seen as 'refractory', 'jealous', and 'intriguing for ascendancy in the councils or government of the country'. These 'chiefs' were labelled as 'the main cause of the weakness of the Kabul government, whose authority does not extend much beyond the capital'.¹⁷²

The form and function of the state was particularly troubling for the mission. Aside from the limited sovereign reach of the Amir, and the apparent division of the country into zones of authority (witnessed in the periodic changing of escort as they entered new territories), there was the tyranny of the ruling classes over the population.¹⁷³ Added to this was an apparently growing influence in the role that Islam played in the moral order sustaining the legitimacy of ruling elites. In one incident, a local dispute between a Hindu family and a faction of *mullahs* prompted the intervention of the *sirdar* on behalf of the Hindus; a move that escalated the situation into a wider protest against the rule of the *sirdar* and the presence of the 'infidel' British mission. As Bellew recalled, '[t]heir whole body, with all their disciples (or *Talibu-l-ilm*)¹⁷⁴ to the number of some five or six hundred, collected at the *Ziarat of Hazrat-ji* – a sacred shrine held in great veneration by the people ... Here they hoisted the green flag, ranted and raved for hours together in a perfect frenzy of fanaticism, and in the afternoon marched upon the Kabul gate.'¹⁷⁵ The tendency to present such efforts under the rubric of 'fanaticism' was becoming a popular trope in describing religiously inspired resistance – one that was increasingly encountered by the British on the frontier. Despite the apparent authority that the *sirdar* had over this '*mullah* fraternity', who were

¹⁷¹ Bellew, *Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan*, 43-4.

¹⁷² Bellew, *Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan*, 44.

¹⁷³ Bellew, *Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan*. This applied to the Afghan escorts that protected them ('truly these men are a curse upon the country they are supposed to protect' 174), as well as to the taxation and legal regimes of the government (275-6).

¹⁷⁴ 'Religious students', apparently a nineteenth century variant on the more familiar *Taliban*.

¹⁷⁵ Bellew, *Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan*, 395.

expelled from the city, this 'fanaticism' evoked British prejudices against what was essentially viewed as an irrational influence on governance.¹⁷⁶

The Lumsden and Bellew mission was far more a surveillance mission than any of the trips of their colonial forbears, a preview of the fact that military 'intelligence', was beginning to develop into a core competency of European armies.¹⁷⁷ Indeed, the data that the mission provided was a barometer for the changing form of colonial knowledge in this era, and in this location. The administration of the north-west frontier in particular was encouraging, institutionalising, and incubating a more official breed of colonial knowledge; avowedly utilitarian, and often linked to the practicalities of military occupation.¹⁷⁸ Not all of these features translated to the material produced by the mission however. On top of this technocratic methodology their work betrayed a sense that Afghanistan was a certain *type* of polity. It provided raw material on the essentially dysfunctional nature of rule and authority, one that reprised well-versed themes of lawlessness and instability, and would be drawn upon by subsequent official observers.¹⁷⁹

In June 1857 the Kandahaar mission received news of a widespread mutiny amongst the native Indian troops of the Indian Army. It soon became clear that the British colonial state in India was facing its biggest crisis to date. The mutiny put the mission in a precarious position.¹⁸⁰ The extent to which this was connected to events in India was unclear, indeed the news that Dost Muhammad Khan had quelled a rumoured *jihad* against the British

¹⁷⁶ David B. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Faultlines on the Afghan Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), Chapter 5.

¹⁷⁷ See: Hevia, *The Imperial Security State*. Official instructions to the Lumsden mission included 'to watch closely the progress of events in Afghanistan, especially in and about Kandahar'; to become 'acquainted with the state of parties in the country, more particularly with the relations of the principal and most influential Chiefs with the Ameer'; and to keep 'informed through the agency of the *vakil* ... of all that is passing in the capital'. IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 20-1.

¹⁷⁸ Anderson, 'Poetics and politics in ethnographic texts'.

¹⁷⁹ J. L. Vaughan, 'Afghanistan and the Military Operations Therein', *RUSI Journal*, 22/98 (1878), 1003-1026.

¹⁸⁰ Bellew recorded an attack on the citadel in which they had been secured with at least one of the 'Kandahar Chiefs' attempting their seizure, along with a 'deputation' of *mullahs* who demanded the British should be handed over to them or ejected from the country. Bellew, *Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan*, 255-6.

emanating from Kabul was looked upon favourably by the British.¹⁸¹ Lumsden noted in a later dispatch that had the earlier agreement of 1857 not been signed prior to the mutiny the Amir 'could not have prevented a general rush down the passes'.¹⁸²

Having survived the turbulence, the mission withdrew in May 1858. Lumsden and Bellew had yielded the most substantial collection of British-sourced information on Afghanistan since 1842 and both would go on to become prominent advisors on Afghanistan policy. Yet Lumsden's final report was unequivocal in its recommendations for keeping Russian influence at bay, advising that this could be achieved by:

'having as little to say to Afghans as possible beyond maintaining friendly and intimate intercourse with the *de facto* Government; by never on any occasion interfering with the internal politics of the country, nor assisting any particular faction, but honestly leaving the Afghans to manage their own affairs in the way which suits them best ... unless under the most pressing danger to Afghanistan, and at the spontaneous and urgent demand of that Government itself, no proposition involving the deputing of British officers into the country should for a moment be entertained.'¹⁸³

This advice would have a prolonged influence on Anglo-Afghan relations for the remainder of Dost Muhammad Khan's rule. In 1858 the heir-apparent, Ghulam Haidar Khan, died. Sher Ali Khan was appointed in his place yet Calcutta refused the Afghan request for *kilat* (congratulations) of his status for fear it would be interpreted as a promise of future support or recognition. Sultan Ahmad Khan, ruler of Herat was knowingly influencing Dost Muhammad Khan at this time, telling the Amir that 'the English are a deceitful race' and encouraging him to ally with Persia.¹⁸⁴ Yet despite their knowledge of this there was little change in policy for the British. The stationing of a British officer in Herat was proposed in 1859 when a Russian adventurer arrived in the city on a 'scientific mission' and requested

¹⁸¹ Bellew, *Journal of a Political Mission to Afghanistan*, 269.

¹⁸² IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 21.

¹⁸³ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 21.

¹⁸⁴ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 22.

permission to travel to Kabul. But the refusal of Dost Muhammad Khan to receive him appeared to validate the British policy of non-interference.¹⁸⁵

In 1862 hostilities broke out between Dost Muhammad and Sultan Ahmad Khan at Herat, with Afghan troops besieging the city. The Shah of Persia lodged a protest with a British claiming a contravention of the treaty that settled the Anglo-Persian war. Yet with a *vakil* of the British government now stationed at Kabul and travelling with the Amir, the British were able to ascertain that this was an internal dispute and therefore claim its irrelevance to the Anglo-Persian treaty. Indeed, the Governor-General observed that the striking of coins and the 'prayers permitted to be made in the Shah's name' were 'not only untoward signs of subjection incompatible with independence, but were also accepted by Persia in direct breach of her treaty with us'.¹⁸⁶ Anxious that they would be seen as complicit, the British nonetheless withdrew their *vakil* and refused Dost Muhammad's requests for assistance.

The siege of Herat lasted until May when the city fell to the Amir's forces.¹⁸⁷ Responding to the formal notification, the Governor-General reminded Dost Muhammad of the Anglo-Persian agreement and urged him not to be 'led into any enterprise which could justly give umbrage to Persia and warrant an appeal ... to the provisions of the treaty'.¹⁸⁸ The plea would go unheard as news was already filtering in of the Amir's death. The nominal ruler of Afghanistan, Sher Ali moved to assure the British that he would 'follow the laudable example' of his father 'in maintaining the strong ties of friendship and amity'¹⁸⁹ between the Afghans and the British, but the Governor-General was already urging caution, instructing the *vakil* 'to abstain from acts which in the present uncertainty as to the establishment of any efficient authority ... could be held to commit the British Government to the support of any of the

¹⁸⁵ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 22.

¹⁸⁶ IOR/L/PS/5/257, Secretary to the Governor of the Punjab to Secretary to the Governor General, 23 September, 1862, p. 13.

¹⁸⁷ IOR/L/PS/5/257, Dost Muhammad Khan to the Governor General, 28 May 1863, p. 473-4.

¹⁸⁸ IOR/L/PS/5/257, Governor General to Dost Muhammad Khan, 3 July 1863, p. 485-6.

¹⁸⁹ IOR/L/PS/5/257, Sher Ali to the Governor General, 11 July 1863, p. 490.

rival candidates for power.’¹⁹⁰ It was clear that the Governor-General was prioritizing Anglo-Persian relations at this time, uncertain of the internal machinations in Afghanistan and at Kabul (partly because the *vakil* was with Sher Ali in Herat), and preferring the imperfect treaty with the known quantity of the Shah of Persia. It was also clear that recognition was not considered necessary for the ambiguous sovereign order of Afghanistan. By October *vakil* reports were reportedly coming in ‘thick and fast’,¹⁹¹ yet still no British recognition was forthcoming until December, nearly six months after Sher Ali first succeeded to the throne.¹⁹²

The selection of Sher Ali as heir-apparent had always been contentious with Dost Muhammad’s older sons who had opposed his selection from the outset. The death of the Dost prompted a descent into civil war, as the rebelling sons surrendered the hard-earned territories in Afghan Turkestan to compete for the throne in Kabul. Afghanistan appeared to the British to be descending into anarchy, validating once more the perception of a violent geography beyond the passes, and reconfirming a policy of non-intervention for the next six years.

Conclusion: Part I - Anglo-Afghan Relations During the Second Reign of Dost Muhammad Khan

The first half of this chapter has considered the impact of the First Anglo-Afghan War and its aftermath on British perceptions of Afghanistan. It has been argued that this period witnessed the emergence and nurturing of a particular projection of Afghanistan as a ‘violent geography’. Partly a function of the fragile information system that informed British knowledge, this perception sustained a resilient policy of non-intervention by the British

¹⁹⁰ IOR/L/PS/5/257, Secretary to the Governor General to the Secretary to the Governor of the Punjab, 3 July 1863, p. 483-4.

¹⁹¹ IOR/L/PS/5/257, Commissioner and Superintendent of Peshawar to the Governor of the Punjab, 15 October 1863, p. 547.

¹⁹² IOR/L/PS/18/A5, ‘Memorandum on Afghan-Turkistan’, p. 110.

throughout this period, which in turn perpetuated the idea that Afghanistan was a space of exception, prone to violence and often a venue for sedition and intrigue. This perception was mediated by shared interests faced by the British and Afghans during Persian efforts on Herat, but was followed by a return to a policy of exception once the threat had passed.

In contrast to those who view nineteenth century Anglo-Afghan relations as driven by Anglo-Russian rivalry, this section has highlighted the instances of collusion and cooperation between these two powers in the region, particularly in the aftermath of the First Anglo-Afghan war. This cooperation, it has been shown, sprung from shared imperial visions concerning 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' states but also shared visions concerning the duties of such states with respect to their sovereign 'others'. This shared perspective on global order served to regulate and routinize Anglo-Russian relations, whilst it served to subjugate and exclude the 'uncivilized' states against whom it was applied. Sovereign status was thereby determined to a large extent by perceptions of cultural and political status, and rhetorically bounded by the visions of great powers. Moreover, as the favourable treatment afforded to Persia shows, there were gradations within the definition of 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' states. Some 'uncivilized' states were more unequal than others. Whilst these instances of Anglo-Russian cooperation are significant, the argument is not that rivalry between them was non-existent, rather that the conflictual narrative of the 'great game' that often describes this period should be questioned. Regional order rested on more than a zero-sum mentality, but was shaped by historically contingent ideas of sovereign status, and normatively policed by the rhetoric of great powers.

Part II - The Era of Frontier Management: Towards the Second Anglo-Afghan War, 1857-1878

Sentiment and 'Science': The Frontier State of Mind

The Sepoy mutiny of 1857 issued forth a profound shift in the structure and character of British rule in India, as well as in the perceptions the British had of the Indian population. The India Act of 1858 transferred the control of British policy in India to the Crown and abolished the East India Company. The new post of Secretary of State for India was created under the oversight of a newly created Council of India, viewed essentially as a consultative body,¹⁹³ and the position of Governor-General became that of the Viceroy (although 'Governor-General' was still accepted parlance). Resistance to British rule was certainly not unheard of in India prior to 1857, but the geographical scale of the uprising was unprecedented, as was the brutality inflicted upon the Indian population by the British in its aftermath. The situation on the frontier however, was relatively calm. Telegrams had notified British authorities of the uprisings, who responded by disarming native Indian regiments. Since the annexation of the Punjab the British had also been raising irregular units from the 'Pathan' population.¹⁹⁴ Originally these had been for the purposes of fighting the Sikhs, taking advantage of the pre-existing antipathy between these two groups and establishing in effect, a policy of divide and rule.¹⁹⁵ In certain areas this policy also doubled as a method of pacification by uprooting those marked as potential future troublemakers.¹⁹⁶ The first contingents had been established in 1846 as the

¹⁹³ Henry Rawlinson, *England and Russia in the East* (London: John Murray, 1875).

¹⁹⁴ 'Pathan' was a British neologism used to encompass both the Pakhtun and Pashtun populations of the northwest frontier of India. See Lindholm, 'Images of the Pathan'.

¹⁹⁵ '*Divide et impera*' was exactly how the policy was described by the prominent frontier public official Henry Bartle Frere. IOR/L/PS/18/A12, H. B. E. Frere, Memorandum – Sind and Punjab Frontier Systems, 22 March 1876.

¹⁹⁶ In Hazara district the Commissioner was advised: 'to discourage disturbance by levelling all forts not garrisoned by our own troops ... A still further security for peace might be

Punjab 'Guides' under Commandant Major Harry Lumsden, a position he would hold till 1862. They subsequently became expanded under the new name of the Punjab Field Force or 'Piffers'¹⁹⁷ and were tasked with the policing of the frontier districts. These irregular units would play a major role in the suppression of the mutiny in Delhi in 1857.¹⁹⁸

The 'loyalty' of the Punjab during the Sepoy rebellion bolstered its role as a key recruiting ground for the Indian Army, whilst other regions that had seen greater instability during the uprising such as Benaras and Awadh were dropped as centres of recruitment. By 1875, as an indication of the increasingly fashionable theories of 'martial races', half of the Indian Army would be recruited from the Punjab.¹⁹⁹ This recruitment reflected the manner in which the Punjab, and the frontier in particular, became a site for policy experimentation from the late 1840s onwards.²⁰⁰ In Hazara district for example, the Commissioner Major Abbott - whose earlier role as Major D'Arcy Todd's assistant at Herat during the First Anglo-Afghan War had earned him recognition - had established a more efficient system for the use of troops in his district. This involved smaller, more mobile units, and the reduction of Sikh-era land taxes, thereby (perhaps unsurprisingly) reducing the need for punitive raids.²⁰¹ Elsewhere, Lumsden developed the idea of controlling the 'Khyber tribes' by restricting their access to salt markets, and establishing Rahmut Khan Orakzai, a former collaborator of the British during the Anglo-Afghan war, as a guardian of the Khyber Pass through a subsidy payment of 2000 rupees per year.²⁰² Perhaps most famous was the 'Sandeman System' on the Baloch frontier, established later on in 1876 by

obtained from the chiefs and elders, by taking the sons of the most influential into service, and employing them in other parts of the Punjab.' IOR/L/PS/5/200, Burn to Elliot, 28 April 1849, p. 664.

¹⁹⁷ This initiative was first approved by the Governor General as early as 1849 under the name of the 'Punjab Irregular Force'. See: IOR/L/PS/5/200, 15 May 1849, p. 749.

¹⁹⁸ See Allen, *Soldier Sahibs*.

¹⁹⁹ Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, 194

²⁰⁰ Tim Moreman, *The Army in India and the Development of Frontier Warfare, 1849-1947* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998). As one observer later described the frontier, 'no better school for soldiers could be found'. IOR/L/PS/18/A23 'Memorandum on the Rectification of the North-West Frontier of India' Maj Gen Henry Green, 30 December 1878, p. 5.

²⁰¹ IOR/L/PS/5/200, Abbott to Lawrence, 29 May 1849, p. 665-8.

²⁰² IOR/L/PS/5/201, Burn to Elliot, 26 September 1850, p. 83-5.

Captain Robert Sandeman, the epitome of what Hopkins and Marsden term 'frontier governmentality'; the assertion of state suzerainty 'through the administration of difference'.²⁰³

Some of these experiments were simply the importation of techniques deployed elsewhere within the colonial state, but there appeared to be a certain mentality associated with the political officers responsible for carrying out these policies that suggested a sense of entrepreneurialism. In Caroe's typically eulogising prose these new imperial heroes - men of the frontier - were 'a splendid band of brothers',²⁰⁴ 'men of action rather than men of thought and plan', lacking 'the subtler insight and grace of Elphinstone', even 'half Pathans themselves'.²⁰⁵ The success of these individuals Caroe attributed to their ability to mirror the society in which they were working: 'the manliness, the wit, the good-fellowship, the loyalty, even the heroism'.²⁰⁶ As he asserted, 'Englishmen and Pathans looked each other between the eyes, and there they found - a man'.²⁰⁷ This apparent uncanny ability to 'know the country',²⁰⁸ and the people, was in large part an expression by Caroe of a certain imperial nostalgia; there was more to these policies than the benevolent subjection of the tribes.

Such perspectives also reflected a wider sense of civilizing missionary zeal, and intimacy with the local population that existed at the time and described the culture surrounding these men that was often expressed in their own service memoirs. In the words of one - Herbert Edwardes - the frontier political officer was engaged in 'a pursuit more active, more directly useful, than the furbishing of rusty arms', one that 'sends him forth beyond our boundaries to be the pioneer of Christian civilization in lands where Idolatry

²⁰³ Hopkins and Marsden, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*, 51. For the Sandeman system see also: Christian Tripodi, "'Good for one but not the other" the "Sandeman System" of Pacification as Applied to Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier 1877-1947', *The Journal of Military History*, 73/3 (2009), 767-802.

²⁰⁴ Caroe, *The Pathans*, 332.

²⁰⁵ Caroe, *The Pathans*, 345.

²⁰⁶ Caroe, *The Pathans*, 345.

²⁰⁷ Caroe, *The Pathans*, 332.

²⁰⁸ Bayly, Christopher A., 'Knowing the Country', *Modern Asian Studies*, 27/1 (1993), 3-43; Cotton, *Nine Years on the North-West Frontier of India*, 5-6, 13-17.

too often occupies the Temple, Corruption the Tribunal, and Tyranny the Throne'.²⁰⁹ Lieutenant General Sir Sydney Cotton had clearly inherited this tradition too, writing in his memoirs: 'There can be no doubt ... that we have been sent by Divine Providence, to these out-of-the-way corners of the globe, for some much more important purpose than to satisfy ourselves; and there can be no doubt either, but that the civilization and restoration of these demi-savages and fanatics, must be mainly the great object of the mission which has been allotted to us.'²¹⁰ In many ways these individuals were the regional successors of the early Afghanistan explorers, and many of them would contribute to a new 'expert' community of knowledge, yet they were increasingly caught somewhere between the improvised and pioneering approach of the early nineteenth-century, and the officializing culture that was beginning to shape the colonial state in India from 1850.

The shift towards the Viceregal system after the mutiny sat within a wider cultural shift concerning the administration and conduct of the colonial state. As Hevia notes, government departments were marking a transition from operating 'on the basis of custom and personal relations', to more "'rational", disinterested procedures'.²¹¹ In India, the period from 1850-1870 marked a 'turning point', as the colonial state 'moved into a higher gear, fortified by a new 'scientific' and professional culture'.²¹² The Northcote-Trevelyn report of 1853, which reformed the civil service (including the introduction of entrance examinations), was simply one manifestation of the impact of Benthamite utilitarianism on the thinking of public officials and its impact on public practice.

In India, there was, to borrow Jordan Branch's terminology, a process of 'colonial reflection',²¹³ as a bureaucratising civil service sent forth new graduates to administer India, who in turn brought back their skills and put

²⁰⁹ Edwardes, *A Year on the Punjab Frontier*, xi.

²¹⁰ Cotton, *Nine Years on the North-West Frontier of India*, 93.

²¹¹ Hevia, *The Imperial Security State*, 35.

²¹² C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 249.

²¹³ Branch, 'Colonial reflection' and territoriality'; Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914*.

them to use in Britain. New 'webs of empire' were forming around this professionalizing class, emboldened by new technologies of communication that speeded up the management of distant locales, providing a technological vehicle for the realization of a truly 'imperial' policy.²¹⁴ As a result, the volume of official correspondence was growing too. By the 1850s the Foreign Office was handling eight times the material it had been processing at the turn of the century.²¹⁵ Partly as a response to this, and partly as a reflection of a greater emphasis on rationalization, official memoranda took on more sweeping view of policy problems. The Foreign Office and the Viceroy no longer dealt so regularly with gifted amateurs, or charismatic adventurer-officials in the mould of Masson and Burnes, but rather expected pre-formed policy briefings that marshalled a range of views from official 'experts' - often members of the India Council - skilfully edited and directed to a central policy question.²¹⁶

This bureaucratizing trend was not just the preserve of the civil service. The military too had been nurturing reformist zeal, partly brought on by the failures of the Crimean War in which inadequate logistics and poor medical care had exposed the structural weaknesses of the British Army.²¹⁷ Although this reforming spirit took longer to manifest itself in the military,²¹⁸ there was - as with the civil service - evidence of a more professional creed. In 1857 the United Services Institution began disseminating new military thinking to the officer class through its journal,²¹⁹ covering topics from tactical development, military health, new military technologies, and

²¹⁴ Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain*.

²¹⁵ Johnson, *Spying for Empire*, 93.

²¹⁶ This shift in the collation of official knowledge would give rise to the Political and Secret Department 'Series' Memoranda. See the hand notes to L/PS/18.

²¹⁷ Hevia, *The Imperial Security State*, Chapter 3.

²¹⁸ The Cardwell Reforms of 1868-1874 were crucial in this respect, resolving the divided power between civilian and military authorities (especially over financing); reducing mandatory enlistment periods on regular duty through implementing a reservist duty after a certain period; ending the sale of commissions; and introducing an examination system for entry into military academies, although this last measure was held up by the conservative influence of the Commander in Chief, the Duke of Cambridge. Hevia, *The Imperial Security State*, 38-9.

²¹⁹ Originally named the 'Naval and Military Museum', The United Services Institution had been in existence since 1831 with the aim of establishing a 'strictly scientific and professional approach' to the study of military affairs. See: 'The Royal United Services Institute Through History', *RUSI* (<http://www.rusi.org/history>).

financial administration. On the frontier, the entrepreneurialism and intuition of the 'brotherhood' was giving way to a more technocratic approach, but with the increasing strategic importance of the frontier this was an approach over which the military had a strong shaping influence.

The service memoirs of Sydney Cotton were typical in this respect, advocating firm military control over administrative affairs, as much as defence. This was justified not just in terms of the practicalities of creating a unified authority, but also on the deep insight of the frontier officer, on his capacity to separate fact from fiction and to 'know the country'. Moreover, as Cotton urged, this need for military authority was demanded by the 'character' of the frontier inhabitants: 'Warlike in their habits and pursuits, and indeed somewhat chivalrous in their feelings, the mountaineers, with the people of the adjacent countries ... entertain a much higher respect for the soldier than for the civilian', he claimed.²²⁰ 'Civil government in such a country', he claimed, 'is, in truth, not only a stumbling block, but a manifest absurdity'.²²¹ Indeed in many ways the frontier was becoming an incubator for a particularly vocal military 'epistemic community',²²² one emboldened by a more 'scientific' approach to their profession, but sustained by the powerful allure of their semi-mythic status, given credence by engrained prejudices that set the frontier apart from the rest of India. It was within this wider cultural, intellectual, and institutional setting that the frontier debates informing policy towards Afghanistan from the 1860s onwards, were taking place.

A prominent contributor to these debates, and an individual who appeared to straddle this civil-military divide, was the former Chief Commissioner of Sind Province, Sir Henry Bartle Frere. His 1863 minute on Punjab frontier policy,

²²⁰ Cotton, *Nine Years on the North-West Frontier*, 14.

²²¹ Cotton, *Nine Years on the North-West Frontier*, 13.

²²² As Peter Haas describes them, an epistemic community is a network of 'knowledge-based experts' that play a role in 'articulating the cause-and-effect relationships of complex problems, helping states identify their interests, framing the issues for collective debate, proposing specific policies, and identifying salient points for negotiation'. Peter Haas, 'Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination', *International Organization*, 46/1 (1992), 2. See also: John Gerard Ruggie, 'International Responses to Technology: Concepts and Trends', *International Organization*, 29/3 (1975), 557-83.

in response to the Viceroy's request for clarity on the policy, offered 'two modes in which a powerful, regular, and civilized government can habitually deal with inferior semi-civilized, and less perfectly organized Governments either within or beyond its own frontier'.²²³ Frere's concept rested on a distinction between the 'English system ... of moral force (yet buttressed by physical force)' and the 'French system', 'one essentially of physical force'. Whilst Frere argued that the English system was most correct in appealing to 'the highest motives of human action ... which even the most savage nations feel', he suggested that the 'French system' most accurately described current policy on the Punjab. For Frere, the 'English' policy pursued in Sind had promoted stability and this 'system' applied elsewhere would promote more 'economical' results, more 'consistent with political safety'.²²⁴

In response however, was an array of opinion favouring a continuation of the existing approach, often from former military officers, who referred to the inherently 'warlike' nature of the 'mountaineers'. As Sir Charles Napier wrote: 'Knowing the character of the whole part of that country ... I can assure his Lordship that he may always expect inroads from the mountains. Nothing can prevent it'.²²⁵ The Commander in Chief in India, Sir Hugh Rose agreed. The tribes of the mountains 'are all Mahomedans whose habits are raids, murders, robbery, and cattle-lifting. ... Their existence is one perpetual state of intestine war.'²²⁶ A consistent military presence was therefore advocated by the Viceroy. Such attitudes reflected the attitude of exclusion that continued to prevail at this time, but comments by Frere on the *character* of British policy also demonstrated a more narcissistic tendency in which the British were beginning to compare their stance with those of other 'imperial' entities.

²²³ L/PS/18/A4, H. B. E. Frere 'Minute by His Excellency the Governor of Bombay, 12 December 1863, p. 1.

²²⁴ L/PS/18/A4, H. B. E. Frere 'Minute by His Excellency the Governor of Bombay, 12 December 1863, p. 1-3.

²²⁵ L/PS/18/A4, Sir Charles Napier to the Governor General, 1850, p. 10.

²²⁶ L/PS/18/A4, Sir Hugh Rose, 1862, p. 10.

There was evidence of a shared imperial 'frontier' mentality elsewhere too. In 1864, the Russian Foreign Minister, Prince Gorchakov, published a memorandum in which he outlined the position of Russia in Central Asia as 'that of all civilised States which are brought into contact with half-savage nomad populations, possessing no fixed social organisation.'²²⁷ In such situations, the 'civilized' state, he insisted, was forced 'in the interest of the security of its frontier and its commercial relations, to exercise a certain ascendancy' over the 'tribes' on the frontier. 'It is a peculiarity of Asiatics', he asserted, 'to respect nothing but visible and palpable force; the moral force of reason and of the interests of civilisation has as yet no hold upon them.'²²⁸ The need for expansion that attended this situation was also presenting financial pressures to the Russian Government, forcing the identification of a 'system' dependent 'not only on reason, which may be elastic, but on geographical and political conditions, which are fixed and permanent'.²²⁹ In acting to promote 'the interests of humanity and civilisation', Gorchakov expressed a hope for 'just and candid appreciation' from other like-minded states, naming the United States, France in Algeria, Holland in her colonies, and England in India.²³⁰

Both Britain and Russia, through their mutual self-identification as 'civilized' imperial states were drawing upon a more global perspective in validating their actions. The solution to this problem of imperial expansion was sought too in the 'civilized' pursuit of ordered, systemic, and 'scientific' approaches. These were empires seeking to tame the frontiers of their new territories, and the frontiers of their imaginations too.

British Frontier Policy During the Afghan Civil War

²²⁷ Ewans, *Securing the Indian Frontier in Central Asia*, 146.

²²⁸ Ewans, *Securing the Indian Frontier in Central Asia*, 146.

²²⁹ Ewans, *Securing the Indian Frontier in Central Asia*, 148.

²³⁰ Ewans, *Securing the Indian Frontier in Central Asia*, 146-9.

The civil war that was engulfing Afghanistan in the mid 1860s, following the death of Dost Muhammad Khan was providing a constant reminder of the perils of the 'barbarous' geography the British felt they were confronting to the north-west of India. Sher Ali was threatened from the north by his older, and disaffected, brother Muhammad Afzul Khan whose decade of experience conquering and administering the northern provinces contributed to his sense of entitlement.²³¹ Following a confrontation in the north between the armies of Muhammad Afzul Khan and Sher Ali, and despite a brief reconciliation, Sher Ali imprisoned his brother on account of the 'intrigues' of Muhammad Afzul's son Abdur Rahman, who opposed their compact. Meanwhile, in the south, another brother of Sher Ali, Muhammad Amin Khan, announced his opposition to the Amir, citing the treatment of Afzul Khan, but also fearing his replacement by one of Sher Ali's sons.²³²

With regular newsletters and *vakil* reports filtering down to the frontier posts the British were apt to interpret the situation as resembling a complete collapse in order. In the aftermath of the imprisonment of Afzul Khan, one *vakil* recorded that rather than pledging allegiance to the Amir, Afzul Khan's troops had largely dispersed, and those who had been induced to join were 'not trusted'. The *vakil* reported that 'thoughtful people assert that half the army, and half the strength of the Cabul Government have [sic] been lost and the other half is destitute of the discipline and order which existed in the time of the late Ameer'.²³³ A request from the Kandahar *sirdar* for support from the British was turned down, indeed, frontier officers, pessimistic of Amin Khan's prospects, requested advice from the Governor-General's office on the accepted protocol for the reception of exiled Afghan leaders. In response the Governor-General instructed that such 'refugees' should be discouraged. They were to be allowed 'no maintenance allowance'; must dismiss 'armed followers'; 'retain only a few servants'; and 'must live where

²³¹ Afzul Khan had already declared himself Amir and had coins struck in his name in defiance of Sher Ali. IOR/L/PS/18/A5, 'Memorandum on Afghan-Turkistan', p. 112; Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War*, 91.

²³² Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War*, 93.

²³³ IOR/L/PS/5/257, *Vakil* correspondence, September 1864, p. 761.

ordered'. In addition, they were not to communicate with Kabul and were not permitted to leave British territory without permission.²³⁴

For some, this violence was a function of Afghanistan's culture of succession. John Wyllie, a prominent advisor to the Viceroy, bemoaned the 'nemesis of Muhammadan polygamy' in which 'children by different mothers scrambling for the inheritance ... [had] laid its curse of anarchy and civil war' on the country.²³⁵ The conflict was viewed as entirely an internal matter and British officials remained resolute in their non-commitment to any of the competing rulers. This was despite the claim by Afzul Khan's son, Azim Khan, when he eventually took Kabul following an uprising against Sher Ali, that he would form an alliance with Russia in defiance of the 'inhospitable and ungrateful English'.²³⁶ Alarmed by this announcement and fearing a diplomatic incident, the British *vakil* opened negotiations. The Viceroy, however, correctly suspecting a ruse was nonplussed in his reply. In response, Azim Khan sought support from the British instead, a request declined on the grounds that the government of India would not 'break the existing engagements' with Sher Ali.²³⁷ The incident was a further indication of the relatively casual attitude towards Russian influence at this time, even though the rumour of this was reported as far as Tehran and picked up by British representatives who recorded it as having evolved into a report that Afzul Khan's son at Bokhara had been recognized as Amir of Afghanistan by the Russian Government in return for his vassalage.²³⁸

Not all observers were so casual. Henry Rawlinson, who had made his career since the First Anglo-Afghan war as a commentator on the 'Eastern Question', published a memorandum in 1868 in which he sought to provoke a more active British policy in Afghanistan and Persia. For the historian Fraser-Tytler, this memo was the 'foundation' upon which the Forward Policy was

²³⁴ IOR/L/PS/5/257, Green to Frere, 24 November 1864, p. 775.

²³⁵ J. S. Wyllie, *Essays on the External Policy of India* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1875), 24.

²³⁶ Wyllie, *Essays on the External Policy of India*, 46.

²³⁷ Letter from the Governor General to Muhammad Afzal Khan, 11 July 1866, cited in Wyllie, *Essays on the External Policy of India*, 48.

²³⁸ Wyllie, *Essays on the External Policy of India*, 46.

built.²³⁹ Certainly, in keeping with the more technocratic nature of official memoranda, Rawlinson backed up his argument with data on the logistics of a Russian advance, rationalising his advocacy of a more active British response. But his call at this stage was largely for political measures. Rawlinson drew attention to the shifting allegiances within the Afghan ruling class as prominent Afghan exiles in Bokhara fell under the sway of growing Russian influence in the region, potentially creating political inroads into Afghanistan. The vague political geography of the northern territories was accordingly translated into the possibility of Russian influence, given weight by the knowledge that Abdur Rahman Khan had married a daughter of the Bokharan Amir. Rawlinson further claimed that Russia now had an Afghan contingent within her service, drawn from this growing Afghan diaspora escaping the conflict in northern areas, and commanded by a grandson of Dost Muhammad Khan.²⁴⁰

In making his argument, Rawlinson skilfully reprised engrained British perceptions of simmering Afghan nefarious intent, claiming that there 'is unfortunately ... at the present time in the Afghan territory a machinery of agitation singularly well adapted for acting on what Sir R. Temple calls the "seething, fermenting, festering mass" of Mahomedan hostility in India.'²⁴¹ This vague conspiracy was attached to the 'malcontents' of northern India, comprising a somewhat unhelpfully narrowed-down typology of the classes 'who are necessarily our enemies, and are not open to any conciliation'. These included 'the priestly class' (Hindu and Muslim); the military and political class; the native princes and chiefs; and finally 'the mob', 'the *canaille*, [and] the blackguardism of the whole population'.²⁴² Even Rawlinson did not believe that Russian invasion was likely, rather the mechanism of the threat had far more to do with perceptions of Afghanistan and its political status than is afforded by accounts that simply highlight the 'forward policy' concept.

²³⁹ Fraser Tytler, *Afghanistan: A Study of Political Developments in Central and Southern Asia*, Third Edition (London: OUP, 1967), 133.

²⁴⁰ Rawlinson, *England and Russia in the East*, 286.

²⁴¹ Rawlinson, *England and Russia in the East*, 289.

²⁴² Rawlinson, *England and Russia in the East*, 288.

Such ‘panic mongers’, as Wyllie termed them,²⁴³ were not influential however on the thinking of Henry Lawrence, the Viceroy at this time. Rawlinson had suggested closer engagement with Sher Ali through the deputation of a British officer at his court, as well as an improvement in the supply lines to the frontier, including an outpost at the Bolan Pass. Yet Lawrence rejected this advice, pointing to the Lumsden mission as evidence against the stationing of British agents in Afghanistan, suggesting they had been ‘in great personal danger ... utterly helpless, and in a condition of practical imprisonment’.²⁴⁴ British presence he argued would ‘engender irritation, defiance, and hatred in the minds of Afghans’.²⁴⁵ Lumsden himself had even suggested that more could be achieved at Peshawar than Kandahar. Once more, this policy was justified on the grounds of avoiding entanglements in Afghan politics. Presuming, as Rawlinson had, that the ‘stirring up’ of ‘elements of dissatisfaction’ was more likely to be Russia’s chosen mode of influence, ‘our strongest security’, the Viceroy wrote, ‘would ... be found to lie in previous absence from entanglements’ at Kabul, Kandahar and elsewhere.²⁴⁶

Whilst this period of British policy has been described in many accounts as ‘masterly inactivity’,²⁴⁷ this question of sovereign recognition, and the inability of the British to scrutinize Afghanistan’s internal politics was crucial to understanding the policy. Lawrence’s preferred method of influence revolved around precisely avoiding any commitments to Afghan rulers whose position was tenuous: ‘Our relations should always be with the *de facto* ruler of the day, and so long as the *de facto* ruler is not unfriendly to us, we should always be prepared to renew with him the same terms and

²⁴³ Wyllie, *Essays on the External Policy of India*, 61.

²⁴⁴ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, ‘Afghanistan’, p. 36.

²⁴⁵ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, ‘Afghanistan’, p. 37.

²⁴⁶ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, ‘Afghanistan’, p. 37.

²⁴⁷ The phrase was originally taken from an article by J.S. Wyllie on the Afghan policy of Governor General Lawrence during the civil war, though became a catch-phrase for those who favoured a ‘stationary’ approach. Wyllie would subsequently write a critique of such a policy in which he referred to ‘mischievous inactivity’. Wyllie, *Essays on the External Policy of India*; BL W3/3695, Earl of Northbrook, ‘The Afghan Question’, Speech at the Guildhall, Winchester, 11 November 1878, p. 5.

favourable conditions obtained under his predecessor. In this way we shall be enabled to maintain our influence in Afghanistan far more effectually than by any advance of troops'.²⁴⁸ As Chakravarty observes, therefore, recognition was the 'principle hinge' on which Lawrence's Afghanistan policy hung.²⁴⁹

Not all government officials agreed with this approach however. George Yule, the former Commissioner of the Indian province of Oude decried the practice of saying 'Good morning, Sir, how do you do?' to successive rulers, which he argued 'must disgust all the leading men, and prolong indefinitely the ill will which the nation already entertains towards us'. Yule proposed a more tailored approach in which 'something more than words should be given to each man according to his character and condition, *little*, comparatively, to one not likely to rule well or long, *much* to one who promised better.'²⁵⁰ A state of sovereign ambiguity was once more creating confusion for the British, yet this underscored once more the presumption that it was possible to gauge the legitimacy of Afghan rulers from a distance. Moreover, it was a further indication that the British did not feel it necessary to recognize the sovereign of a territory they were beginning to view as naturally fragmented, and beyond the norms of interstate intercourse.

Rather than deal with the ambiguities of Afghan politics, greater efforts were put on reaching an agreement with Russia. The Gorchakov memorandum of 1864 had framed the problem Russia faced with her frontiers in Central Asia in terms that the British could recognize as one of managing 'uncivilized' populations. Responding to this, the Foreign Secretary at the time, John Russell, had proposed a more cooperative approach to Anglo-Russian actions in Central Asia, but following a lukewarm response from St Petersburg and a general absence of urgency over Russian expansion,²⁵¹ the plan was shelved

²⁴⁸ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 29.

²⁴⁹ Chakravarty, *From Khyber to Oxus*, 48.

²⁵⁰ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 31.

²⁵¹ The Secretary of State for India in 1867 reflected this when he wrote: 'The conquests which Russia has made, and apparently is still making, in Central Asia, appear ... to be the natural result of the circumstances in which she finds herself placed, and to afford no ground whatever for representations indicative of suspicion or alarm on the part of this country.' IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 32.

after Russell's departure from his post in 1865.²⁵² It was resurrected in a revised form upon the arrival of Lord Clarendon as Foreign Secretary in 1869, who took advantage of a propitious atmosphere in the Russian and English press by suggesting a 'neutral' territory between the two powers.²⁵³ The suggestion prompted a response from Gorchakov that the Russian Emperor viewed Afghanistan 'as completely outside the sphere within which Russia may be called upon to exercise her influence. No intervention or interference whatever, opposed to the independence of that State enters into his intentions.'²⁵⁴ The comment initiated an Anglo-Russian attempt to mutually agree the limits of such a 'neutral' territory.

This demarcation immediately faced ambiguities however. As a Secret Letter considering the 'present possessions of the Amir' noted in 1870, in 'countries which have never been scientifically surveyed, and boundaries of which have been liable to more or less fluctuation, it may be difficult to describe existing boundaries with perfect accuracy.'²⁵⁵ As another British official remarked, 'there is no such thing' as an Afghan boundary.²⁵⁶ The British proposed as a northern limit, the Oxus river, primarily out of a desire to establish a neutral zone north of the Hindu Kush, leaving Afghanistan under their theoretical sphere of influence, but this betrayed a misleading sense of territorial fixity.²⁵⁷ Sher Ali had, by September 1868, recovered Kabul, with the assistance of his son who had been in charge in Kandahar. This was followed by a declaration of loyalty from the northern states of Afghan-Turkistan, yet the recovery of his status was still recent and the continued loyalty of the north in particular, given the influence of the exiled chiefs, remained unclear.

In response to the Anglo-Russian diplomatic debate however, and in a sign of the increasing capacity of the civil service to create its own official histories, a study was commissioned attempting to identify the limits of the Afghan

²⁵² A. P. Thornton, 'The Reopening of the 'Central Asian Question', 1864-9', *History* 41 (1956), 122-136.

²⁵³ Chakravarty, *From Khyber to Oxus*, 56.

²⁵⁴ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 43.

²⁵⁵ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 44.

²⁵⁶ Chakravarty, *From Khyber to Oxus*, 62.

²⁵⁷ Chakravarty, *From Khyber to Oxus*, 62.

territory.²⁵⁸ This was a quest for 'territorial fixity'²⁵⁹ that was far more technocratic than the earlier rather tentative efforts of the East India Company, drawing upon four 'authorities' for political boundaries: the treaties between the contending parties; 'statements respecting payment of revenue or tribute to the suzerain'; 'the recognized obligation of inferior chieftain to do homage, to render military service, or to pay a *nuzzerana*²⁶⁰ on succession'; and 'the permanent establishment of frontier posts for the collection of customs on goods, and taxes on travellers'. Yet these efforts carried the caveat that determining such limits was not possible 'with the precision which is attainable in the description of civilized countries.' Crucially, the resulting map and the history that accompanied it drew upon existing European knowledge of the territory, thereby reactivating the corpus of colonial knowledge, and especially the works of Elphinstone and Burnes. This reactivation was observable in other forums too. In a speech to the Royal United Services Institute chaired by Henry Rawlinson and delivered by George Campbell, an officer of the Bengal Civil Service, the speaker remarked on how Elphinstone had 'in many respects occupied the ground so fully and so well, as hardly to leave room for another'.²⁶¹ However, it was noted that the political circumstances had 'entirely changed' since Elphinstone's time, and Campbell added, 'we can hardly suppose that after years of British occupation there is not room for at least an enlarged and modernized work'.²⁶²

The Anglo-Russian debate over the limits of Afghan territory would continue until 1873 when an agreement was finally made in which the territories previously held by Dost Muhammad, and now held by Sher Ali, were to be considered Afghan territory, but the entire debate was conducted over the head of the Afghan Amir. In effect this was a regulation of Amir's sovereign authority by the two imperial powers of Russia and Britain. The negotiations

²⁵⁸ IOR/L/PS/18/A5, 'Memorandum on Afghan-Turkistan' by J. Talboys Wheeler, Assistant Secretary to Government of India, in the Foreign Department (Calcutta, Officer of Superintendent of Government Printing, 1869).

²⁵⁹ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*.

²⁶⁰ financial tribute.

²⁶¹ George Campbell, 'The North-West Frontier of India', *RUSI Journal*, 13/54 (1869), 224.

²⁶² Campbell, 'The North-West Frontier of India', 224.

served the wider purpose of managing Anglo-Russian relations in Central Asia, yet they also reflected once more the prevailing attitude that it was the duty of civilized states, with their growing 'scientific' paraphernalia of boundary mapping and expertise, to establish the borders of their 'uncivilized' frontier communities. Afghanistan was not just viewed as technologically incapable of carrying out such frontier management, but it was seen as unable to reciprocate the diplomatic pledges upon which any agreement would lie.

The Amir was himself a subject of the terms of this negotiated settlement, such that the British committed to maintaining the 'peaceful attitude' of Sher Ali with regards to Russian interests. Just as the frontier resembled a site of anxiety to the British, so did it for the Russians, this shared fear is often reduced to a masking tactic for acquisitive territorial urges, but in this case it helped impose a routine on Anglo-Russian relations. Such was the power of this idea that in October 1867 the Governor-General was moved to remark 'I am not myself at all certain that Russia might not prove a safer ally, a better neighbour, than the Mahommedan races of Central Asia and Cabul. She would introduce civilization; she would abate the fanaticism and ferocity of Mahommedanism, which still exercises so powerful an influence in India.'²⁶³

The colonial knowledge upon which these territorial delimitations were built included treaty agreements signed between the rulers of these states,²⁶⁴ and the employment of 'local' knowledge embodied within the works of Elphinstone *et al* did contribute to a degree of hybridity in terms of the incorporation of indigenous forms of territoriality, but a new form of closure was now impacting on the Afghan polity, driven by imperial interests. In an example of Jordan Branch's observation, cartography – albeit rudimentary in this instance – was beginning to make 'certain goals imaginable and appealing'.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 30.

²⁶⁴ IOR/L/PS/18/A5, 'Memorandum on Afghan-Turkistan', see chapter four for a discussion on Kabul-Bokhara treaty negotiations that attempted to delimit their borders from 1850-1862.

²⁶⁵ Branch, 'Mapping the Sovereign State', 21.

The Frontier Debate Takes Off, 1874-78

The Second Anglo-Afghan War is regularly attributed to the reckless actions of Lord Lytton, the Viceroy of India who succeeded Northbrook in 1876. However, the conditions in which the British made the decision to go to war again in 1878 preceded him. The 1870s saw a reappraisal of questions surrounding Afghan policy as the intellectual, institutional, and political changes charted in this chapter began to manifest themselves in a fierce frontier debate. Two primary issues dominated this: the stationing of British officers in Afghan territory, and the administration of frontier defence.

The first issue related to the lack of political intelligence on Afghanistan and the states beyond it. The scepticism with which 'native informants' were viewed in Afghanistan was part a broader move away from the 'local knowledge' of the colonial state in India, towards more official collection methods. This was a process that began prior to the mutiny of 1857 but was advanced in its aftermath as officials sought more formal methods and practices.²⁶⁶ But whilst there was a long-term decline in the use of 'native informants' in the centre, on the periphery where official presence was weakest, the old practices necessarily lived on. In the 1870s, these practices faced their most sustained challenge.

Taking up his post in 1874, the new Secretary of State to India under Disraeli's administration, the Marquis of Salisbury, indicated these concerns to the Viceroy remarking on the 'comparative scantiness of the information [from Afghanistan] which it is in your Excellency's power to supply'.²⁶⁷ Under scrutiny was not merely the content but the methodology of information collection. Speaking of the *vakil* at Kabul, Salisbury doubted whether he was able to supply 'any facts which it is not in the Ameer's wish that you should

²⁶⁶ Bayly, *Empire and Information*.

²⁶⁷ IOR/L/PS/A19, 'Afghanistan', Marquis of Salisbury, 22 January 1875, p. 57.

receive',²⁶⁸ adding 'it is not likely that any Native agent would possess a sufficient insight into the policy of western nations to collect the information you require'. Salisbury also questioned the neutrality of the agent 'in respect to religious and national controversies', a neutrality he argued 'only a European can possess'.²⁶⁹ Giving a more local perspective Frere recorded that although the abstracts that were passed to the Viceroy from the frontier officers were 'weeded of much extraneous and trifling matter', they still contained a 'vast portion of Durbur [sic] gossip in proportion to the important items of intelligence which [even] the most ordinary newswriter at a Native Court cannot help sometimes transmitting.'²⁷⁰ The British had a concept of what appropriate intelligence looked like and 'Durbur gossip' and 'hearsay' was not it, despite the fact that it was precisely this form of rumour that they feared breaking out across India. On the frontier, a more instrumental form of practical knowledge was now being sought.

Aside from the *vakil's* role as an intelligence source, his capacities as a tool of British influence were also questioned. This was a judgement based largely on prejudice, revolving around the belief that European diplomats with their 'superior intellect and force of character' could more easily sway the 'stubborn prejudices' of the Amir, who could only reason by his 'Asiatic experience'.²⁷¹ For Frere, this called for a renaissance of the 'noble school of frontier officers', a nostalgia within empire that called for men trained up 'in the spirit of your Malcolms, Elphinstones, and Metcalfes ... who by their character and the confidence the Natives have in them, can hold their own without the immediate presence of battalions and big guns.'²⁷² This retrograde approach to policy design was evident elsewhere too.

²⁶⁸ The frontier officers Cavagnari and Pollock had confirmed this was the case in an official dispatch. The latter remarked that 'intelligence from Afghanistan was never so hard to obtain as it is now', and information from Central Asia was even more scarce. IOR/L/PS/18/A19, Salisbury, 15 November 1875, p. 60. See also: Ewans, *Securing the Indian Frontier in Central Asia*, 59-60.

²⁶⁹ IOR/L/PS/A19, 'Afghanistan', Marquis of Salisbury to Lord Northbrook, 22 January 1875, p. 57.

²⁷⁰ Sir Bartle Frere, *Afghanistan and South Africa, Letters to the Right Hon. W. E. Gladstone M.P. regarding portions of his Midlothian Speeches, and a letter to the later Sir John Kaye, and other papers*, Fifth Edition (London: John Murray, 1881), 61.

²⁷¹ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 61-2. See also Frere, *Afghanistan and South Africa*, 31-2

²⁷² Frere, *Afghanistan and South Africa*, 33.

Where political knowledge was deficient, Afghanistan 'experts' filled the gap. Nostalgia prevailed here too, with Lumsden remarking on how the 'attachment of the nobles to the person and Government of the Amir Dost Muhammad Khan is not found to have passed to the Amir Sher Ali Khan, nor to the Government he has essayed to improve'.²⁷³ Drawing on the deep well of colonial knowledge Rawlinson chose to highlight the 'natural incoherency and indocility' of the Afghan population, presenting Sher Ali's reign as a reminder that 'Afghanistan never has had, and never can have, the cohesion and consistency of a regular monarchical government'. There was 'little prospect' of even settled government under Sher Ali, he concluded.²⁷⁴ Others favoured a more conspiratorial outlook based more on conjecture and paranoia than empirics. As Salisbury warned, '[t]he disposition of the people in various parts of Afghanistan, the designs and intrigues of its Chiefs, the movement of nomad tribes upon its frontier, the influence which foreign powers may possibly be exerting within and without its borders, are matters of which a proper account can only be rendered to you by an English agent residing in the country.'²⁷⁵ Salisbury also pointed attention towards the Ottoman Empire, 'the first Mahometan State in the world', as an epicentre of a pan-Islamic conspiracy, giving 'renewed vigour to the impulses of fanaticism which in these countries are never in complete repose'.²⁷⁶

The proposed solution to these deficiencies in political intelligence involved the stationing of British officers in Afghanistan itself, but this carried a number of risks. First was the danger presented to the agents themselves; a fear that recalled the horrors of the First Anglo-Afghan War and the violent geography that had been nurtured throughout the preceding decades. This view resonated particularly with Lawrence and Mayo, who impressed the

²⁷³ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan'. Lumsden, 'A Consideration of the present Anglo-Russian position in Central Asia', 24 June 1875, p. 8.

²⁷⁴ Rawlinson, *England and Russia in the East*, 370.

²⁷⁵ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', Marquis of Salisbury to Lord Northbrook, 22 January 1875, p. 57.

²⁷⁶ IOR/L/PS/18/A22, Salisbury, November 1877, p. 18; See also BL W3/3689, W. Muir, 'Prefatory Note', p. 9; p. 17-18.

risks on Russian diplomats as well.²⁷⁷ There was an associated concern too that the agents would become the guarantors of a despotic government.²⁷⁸ Added to this was the potential impact on British prestige should the Amir refuse the request, the likelihood of which Northbrook suggested was 'beyond doubt'.²⁷⁹ Indeed Bellew was able to inform the Viceroy, through his medical contact, Syed Nur Muhammad, that the Amir perceived the stationing of English officers at Kabul as 'tantamount to his relinquishing of his own authority'.²⁸⁰

The question of stationing agents in Afghanistan involved not simply questions of information and intelligence gathering, but it was viewed as a signifier of British influence at Kabul; an influence that had been on the wane since the 1873 conference at Simla. The British were aware of Russian 'native informants' at Kabul yet their influence was not initially considered significant. The Amir had also been passing letters to the British addressed to Sher Ali from General Kaufmann, the Russian Governor-General of Turkistan. In turn the British had been instructing him in his replies – a practice that the Russians were aware of.²⁸¹ Once more there was great power collusion over their respective interests in Afghanistan. As Anglo-Afghan relations cooled however, the Amir's correspondence with Britain began to dry up too, raising the question of whether the Russian influence was ongoing. Throughout the summer of 1876, as Sher Ali considered a further British request for the stationing of agents at Kabul, the *vakil* reported 'frequent confidential emissaries' from General Kaufmann.²⁸² In August 1877 a Turkish Envoy to Afghanistan, having passed through the country to India, reported to the British that Sher Ali was 'badly disposed' towards the British on account of their movement towards Kalat, and that Russian influence was 'in the ascendent'. He also reported an 'active Russian agent' in the form of a

²⁷⁷ IOR/L/PS/18/A9, Lord Lawrence, 4 January 1869, p.3; Forsyth to Brunnow, p. 4; Buchanan to Clarendon, p. 4.

²⁷⁸ BL/W3/3689, W. Muir, 'Prefatory Note', p. 15.

²⁷⁹ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 63.

²⁸⁰ BL W3/3690, Viscount Halifax, 'The Afghan Question', 9 December 1878, p. 10.

²⁸¹ L/PS/18/A38, 'Russian Correspondence with Kabul'.

²⁸² L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 70.

Kokandi notable.²⁸³ The question of stationing British agents therefore became more pressing.

The second aspect of frontier policy that saw greater debate in the 1870s concerned how to administer this territory. As discussed, conversations over this topic preceded Anglo-Russian tensions. In the 1870s however, the debate took on greater urgency, driven partly by the 'epistemic community' of the professionalizing military, and partly by a greater 'imperial character' to British frontier policy.

Rail transport had revolutionized military thought in India. The events of 1857 had elevated the imperative for rapid concentration of military force at potentially short notice, and from potentially distant locations. With growing military recruitment and presence on the north-west frontier this troop transportation became ever more crucial. Routes to the north-west offered the dual benefit of allowing 'rapid concentration'²⁸⁴ to the frontier, as well as the option of transporting reinforcements to any internal disturbances elsewhere in India. Rail transport also offered a more economical use of force. As early as 1858, Colonel J. P. Kennedy Late calculated that railways offered to cut gross troop numbers in India from 325,000 men to 100,000 thereby reducing costs from a remarkably precise figure of £13,776,363 to £6,202,045.²⁸⁵ New possibilities opened up, including the occupation of Quetta, which as Napier noted, was now more possible and desirable through canal and railway transport.²⁸⁶ Technology and mobility, as well as the institutionalization of 'military science' also allowed policy makers to see more clearly the connections between previously distinct realms of practice. Henry Bartle Frere, for example, was able to reflect on the relevance of his experience administering Tanzania and South Africa to the policies in the

²⁸³ NAI Foreign Department, Secret Consultations, 'Afghanistan: Turkish Envoy. Reporting to the Porte that the Amir of Afghanistan is badly disposed towards the English', No. 198, March 1878.

²⁸⁴ IOR/L/PS/18/A10, H. B. Lumsden, 'Rough Notes for a Lecture on Affghanistan, and our Relations with it', 1 May 1875, p. 4.

²⁸⁵ J. P. Kennedy Late, 'The Strategical and National Importance of Extending Railway Communication Throughout the British Colonies, More Especially Throughout India', *RUSI Journal* 2/5 (1858), 78.

²⁸⁶ IOR/L/PS/18/A15, May 1877, p. 1.

north-west of India.²⁸⁷ The Royal United Services Institute²⁸⁸ meanwhile, published articles that considered similar 'frontier defence' problems in such disparate locales as Kurdistan, and Myanmar, including advice on dealing with regions elsewhere in India.²⁸⁹ The specificity surrounding local policy debates on the frontier was being cast into a wider, more generic problem of frontier defence.

As a corollary of the professionalising and reformist creed that was impacting on official practice elsewhere, the frontier was subject to administrative streamlining too. Northbrook was among many who called for a greater 'unity of administration',²⁹⁰ and as Salisbury observed: 'With the help of rail and telegraph ... one man can govern a large territory almost as easily as a small one'.²⁹¹ Frere, reprising his two 'systems' of frontier management that had initially met with lukewarm reception, was a vocal supporter of such reform. He once more called for a 'Sind system' of unified command; operating with the population through local elites; on the principle of 'do as we would be done by'; and in accordance with 'the ordinary rules of war in civilized countries'. Such a system, he argued should replace the divided and divisive 'Punjab system', which rejected the principle that it was 'possible and desirable to carry on war against such barbarous frontier tribes on the same principles as against civilized mountaineers in Europe'. The exception to this was Peshawar, which qualified as a 'settled area' and was therefore subject to a more interventionist policy of administration, resulting in fewer incidents of unrest. As Frere summarized, whilst Sind was dealt with 'as far as possible as we would with Belgium or Switzerland', in Punjab the 'tribes'

²⁸⁷ Frere, *Afghanistan and South Africa*, 19-24.

²⁸⁸ The Institution had been awarded a Royal Charter in 1860. See: 'The Royal United Services Institute Through History', *RUSI* (<http://www.rusi.org/history>).

²⁸⁹ Ralph E. Carr, 'The Kurdistan Mountain Ranges, Considered in Reference to a Russian Advance on the Tigris Valley', *RUSI Journal*, 22/94 (1978), 155-183; Hyde Clark, 'On the Organisation of the Army of India, with Especial Reference to the Hill Regions', *RUSI Journal*, 9/7 (1859), 18-27.

²⁹⁰ IOR/L/PS/18/A22, p. 6.

²⁹¹ IOR/L/PS/18/A22, Lord Salisbury, August 1877, p. 17.

were dealt with 'as the French would with tribes beyond their border in Algeria – as powers outside the pale of civilized diplomacy'.²⁹²

The improvised and intuitive mode of the man of the frontier was being challenged by the technocratic administrator; but more than this, the perils of the civil-military divide that so exercised Edwardes and Cotton was coming under the control of a predominant militarist epistemic community, who were capturing the debate. Not all supported this trend. Lawrence for example believed military men, as well as merchants and 'men of science' were too often 'disposed to advocate forward movements as conducive to their professional advancement ... hence arises a feeling to despise what looks like a policy of inaction'.²⁹³ But Lawrence was increasingly in the minority in the debate.

In the vision of the most ardent supporters of this systemic approach to frontier management, 'colonial knowledge' as an intellectual endeavour was suppressed by a sweeping technocracy, and was immediately applied to policy ends. Discussing the recent occupation of Quetta, Major General Henry Green wrote: 'The Baloch, although a Mahomedan, is not a religious fanatic, and he bears no hostile feeling towards Europeans ... From Quetta to Candahar I am less acquainted with the character of the people. I should, however, imagine that a policy of liberality, firmness, and justice would have the same effect upon them as it has upon the Baloch.'²⁹⁴ On the 'Patan tribes' he was less favourable, yet still utilitarian in his outlook: 'They have no acknowledged head; even their tribal chiefs receive only a nominal obedience; they are, as a rule, fanatics in religion, treacherous, revengeful, and totally untrustworthy; they hate all Europeans, and the life of a British Officer entering their mountains is as insecure now as it was 30 years ago. ...

²⁹² IOR/L/PS/18/A12, H. B. E. Frere, 'Memorandum – Sind and Punjab Frontier Systems', 22 March 1876.

²⁹³ Frere, *Afghanistan and South Africa*, 48.

²⁹⁴ IOR/L/PS/18/A23, Major General Henry Green (Retd), 'Memorandum on the Rectification of the North-West Frontier of India', 30 December 1878. p. 3-4.

Such races are, I consider, one of the best defences that we could have in the rear and flanks of an invading army'.²⁹⁵

This technocracy was observable elsewhere. The capture of Quetta in 1877 had been one stage in what was now being described as the establishment of the 'scientific frontier', a strategic concept that attempted to define the most effective arrangement of forces in order to ensure the defence of north India. In this vision Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat became vertices on a strategic triangle that might be dominated by either Russia or Britain through the 'aids of military science'. For Major General E. B. Hamley, Kandahar was the key node of this defensive posture, with the Lower Indus to be the 'fixed pivot of operations, supporting forward camps that would ensure the protection of the Bolan Pass as a line of retreat'.²⁹⁶ This particular techno-cultural mediation allowed the frontier to be viewed as one, and therefore matched the administrative drive for a more unitary approach. But it also suggested something of the 'imperial character' that frontier policy was now exhibiting.²⁹⁷ Such an outlook inevitably brought comparisons with Russia. For Rawlinson there was an 'essential difference': Russian policy was 'positive, active, and aggressive'; British policy was 'purely defensive and stationary'.²⁹⁸ The advances being made by Russia were not necessarily viewed as aggressive towards British India itself. Indeed, Frere was not alone in viewing the taking of Merv, 'a troublesome refuge for frontier robbers and man-stealers' as a necessary step, 'useful to civilization and good order, irrespective of Russian interests'.²⁹⁹ The fear was rather that a Russian advance would be taken at a moment of British weakness, and moreover, in failing to appear to respond, local opinion would turn against the British.

²⁹⁵ IOR/L/PS/18/A23, Major General Henry Green (Retd), 'Memorandum on the Rectification of the North-West Frontier of India', 30 December 1878. p. 4-5.

²⁹⁶ E. B. Hamley, 'The Strategical Conditions of our Indian North-West Frontier', *RUSI Journal*, 22/98 (1878), 1027-1046.

²⁹⁷ The words of the Government of India in a dispatch to London in 1877. IOR/L/PS/18/A22, p. 10.

²⁹⁸ Letter to Sir John Kaye, 12 June 1874, in: Frere, *Afghanistan and South Africa*, 31.

²⁹⁹ Letter to Sir John Kaye, 12 June 1874, in: Frere, *Afghanistan and South Africa*, 28.

But responding to this fear was not simply a question of establishing the 'scientific frontier'. Emboldened by their prolonged occupation on the north-west, many officials were now projecting into Afghanistan what they perceived as the 'civilizing effect of European contact ... upon semi-barbarous tribes'.³⁰⁰ In this policy shift the representation of an 'uncivilized Afghanistan' had found a natural response. The 'civilizing effect' as embodied in the frontier system of Sind could emanate out across the region. Rawlinson drew on his own experiences in Kandahar to assert that 'there is no Asiatic nation, more amenable to the influence of kindly treatment, or ... more easily managed' than the Afghans, and argued that the policies deployed in Sind would have the same results 'in the plain of Jellalabad and elsewhere'.³⁰¹ For Henry Green, the British 'experience of Asiatics' had taught them that they must be 'amongst the people' they wished to influence, and therefore 'such influence can no longer be exerted from Calcutta or from Simla'.³⁰²

The policy of 'civilizing influence' also injected into the debate contemporary ideas of racial supremacy, brought to the fore by Darwin's theory of evolution which had exerted a profound effect on public intellectual thought since the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. Such thinking was mirrored in Salisbury's increasing support for 'pacific invasion' of Afghanistan, which he described as the principle that 'when you bring the English into contact with inferior races, they will rule whatever the ostensible format of their presence ... not by any political privilege or military power, but by the right of the strongest mind'.³⁰³ Frere's views on the personal and racial qualities of the English officers who would carry out this task mirrored such views.³⁰⁴ Indeed for these observers, this need to exert a 'civilizing effect' was not just good policy, but also a duty. Frere was perhaps the most outspoken on this belief,

³⁰⁰ IOR/L/PS/18/A22, Rawlinson, 28 July 1877, p. 14.

³⁰¹ IOR/L/PS/18/A22, Rawlinson, 28 July 1877, p. 14. This outlook followed an 1875 republication of his earlier works on the Central Asia question, in which he laid out similar arguments. Ewans, *Securing the Indian Frontier in Central Asia*; Rawlinson, *England and Russia in the East*.

³⁰² IOR/L/PS/18/A23, Major General Henry Green (Retd.), 'Memorandum on the Rectification of the North-West Frontier of India', 30 December 1878, p. 6.

³⁰³ John Lowe Duthie, 'Pragmatic Diplomacy or Imperial Encroachment? British Policy Towards Afghanistan, 1874-1879', *The International History Review*, 4/5 (1983), 489.

³⁰⁴ Duthie, 'Pragmatic Diplomacy or Imperial Encroachment?', 479.

arguing that the British were had been exhibiting a 'neglect of neighbourly duties and responsibilities, incumbent on a rich, civilized, and powerful nation, towards poor barbarous tribes on its borders. We have allowed a noble people, capable of rapid and permanent advancement in civilization, to grow in numbers, whilst they festered in barbarism'.³⁰⁵

Lord Lytton and the Second Anglo-Afghan War

Anglo-Russian relations in the mid 1870s were in decline. The 1873 agreement that agreed spheres of influence and settled the northern boundary at the Oxus river, had been based on allaying fears that sprung from rivalry, but it was also a reflection of a shared desire to delimit their respective realms of expansion, and to manage relations. Once again, the distinction between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' was central to this. Combined with the fashionable theories on race and natural selection, this distinction amounted to an imperial expansionist creed, that was recognised in Russia, and viewed by many in Britain as a natural, almost inevitable outcome. In a correspondence with India Council Member, and historian of the First Anglo-Afghan War, John Kaye, Henry Bartle Frere outlined this creed in revealing detail:

'I need not ... repeat how the annexation comes about; how the civilized power; theirs as well as ours, is forced to put its best men in contact with the uncivilized neighbour; how, if the frontier commander is ambitious, his uncivilized neighbours give him constant and apparently justifiable cause for hostilities, which in the end must always lead to the victorious advance of the stronger and more civilized power; how, if the frontier commander is conscientious or unambitious, the uncivilized neighbour gravitates to the stronger power ... how, when any semi-civilized "Humpty Dumpty" gets his fall, "all the king's horses and all the king's men" are utterly unable to set him up again; ... how the one power is insensibly and by internal vigour urged to grow and aggress, while the other has no inherent force of resistance, unless he gives up his antiquated arms and indiscipline, and takes to himself the powerful weapons and military array of civilized nations, which are of no avail ... unless he abandons

³⁰⁵ Frere, *Afghanistan and South Africa*, 17.

also his barbarous habits and policy of finance and internal administration, in a word, unless he enters the ranks of civilized nations.'

The 1873 Anglo-Russian agreement was a weak commitment, based on correspondence between the foreign ministers of each country, and exhibited a poor grasp of the geography it related to.³⁰⁶ Nonetheless, under the agreement, Britain had committed to using their influence to restrain Sher Ali from any hostile actions to the north, and when Prime Minister Gladstone implied publically that the British commitment only amounted to a 'moral influence', there was indignation from the Russians, demonstrating the weight they ascribed to the quasi-treaty. The British too indicated their trust in Russian commitments when they refused a defensive agreement with Sher Ali at a later 1873 conference with the Afghan Amir. At this conference the Amir had expressed his alarm at the Russian threat, which he said 'aroused the gravest apprehensions in the minds of the people of Afghanistan'.³⁰⁷ But upon communicating this alarm to the Secretary of State in London, Northbrook was instructed to inform the Amir that the British 'do not at all share his alarm, and consider there is no cause for it'.³⁰⁸ The British did not credit the Amir with the capacity to faithfully sustain a defensive agreement, and as the official history put it, they were against 'causing needless irritation to a friendly power'.³⁰⁹ For these reasons, Sher Ali did not get the support he hoped for from the British at the 1873 conference, despite the demands placed on him by the British to accept their Officers into his territory.

Prior to his departure for his post in India, Lord Lytton had studied Rawlinson's work, and Frere had handed him his memo on the Sind and Punjab policies on his way through Aden.³¹⁰ Lytton was therefore briefed on, and adopted the views of, two of the more committed advocates of this civilizing creed, wrapped in the systemic, 'scientific' policy language of a new

³⁰⁶ Ewans, *Securing the Indian Frontier in Central Asia*, 42-3.

³⁰⁷ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', Syed Nur Muhammad Shah to Northbrook, 12 July 1873, p. 50.

³⁰⁸ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', Duke of Argyll to Lord Northbrook, 26 July 1873, p. 50.

³⁰⁹ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 53.

³¹⁰ Chakravarty, *From Khyber to Oxus*, 134,

epistemic community. Added to this was the advice of his closest military advisor, Colonel Colley, who was an ardent proponent of the 'scientific frontier'.³¹¹ Lytton arrived in India in 1876 with permissive directives. His predecessor, Northbrook, had resigned over the continual disagreements he had with Salisbury over the need for British agents in Kabul, which Northbrook viewed as premature, likely to prove ineffective, and unlikely to be accepted without a better offer being put to Sher Ali.³¹² Lytton, by contrast, arrived with the firm instruction to view Afghan policy and frontier administration 'as an imperial concern'.³¹³

Rather than Northbrook's insistence that Afghan policy should be conducted in communication with Russia through St Petersburg, Lytton adopted a more unilateral approach and was granted 'considerable discretion' in keeping the policy exclusively under his control.³¹⁴ Underpinning all of this were Anglo-Russian tensions over the Balkans that had been ongoing since 1875. Meanwhile, months after the Anglo-Russian agreement on the borders of Afghanistan, Russian troops had annexed the Central Asian Khanate of Khiva. Kokend followed in 1876. Whilst neither of these moves contradicted the 1873 agreement, they indicated expansionist tendencies on the part of the Russians and further concerned Sher Ali. Prior to Lytton's departure for India, Salisbury and Lytton had established a plan to pressure Russia in Central Asia as a strategic diversion by raising an insurrection amongst the Turkmen population and the Khanates of Central Asia. This has tended to sustain the view that the Second Anglo-Afghan War was the outcome of these tensions, yet this obscures the fact that Lytton had much say over the manner in which that campaign was carried out.

Lytton's campaign to restore British political influence in Afghanistan began through political means in a request for the stationing of a British officer in

³¹¹ John Slagg, 'The True 'Scientific Frontier' of India', *The Nineteenth Century* (July 1885), 151-9.

³¹² Ewans, *Securing the Indian Frontier in Central Asia*, 65; IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', Northbrook, 28 January 1876, p. 63.

³¹³ Chakravarty, *From Khyber to Oxus*, 142.

³¹⁴ Chakravarty, *From Khyber to Oxus*, 143.

Kabul. In return, the Amir was to be granted the concessions he had sought at the 1869 Ambala conference and the later 1873 Simla conference, specifically, the payment of a subsidy; recognition of his chosen heir; and the pledge of support in case of external aggression.³¹⁵ In reply, the Amir refused the proposed British mission on the grounds that he could not ensure its safety and it would entail the acceptance of a Russian mission too. However, he eventually agreed to a meeting to discuss terms for improved relations to which he agreed to send his own *vakil*, Syed Nur Muhammad. This meeting took place in October 1876 in Peshawar. It was clear at this meeting that the Viceroy would only accept terms that amounted to a state of divided sovereignty for the Amir including British oversight over Afghanistan's external relations; a commitment to pass on all communication with Russia including any Russian agents; the stationing of British agents in Herat (though not in Kabul); and that Afghanistan be 'freely opened to Englishmen' (though accepting the Amir was not responsible for their safety).³¹⁶

This meeting also made clear the extent of distrust that the Amir had of the British. The one-sided nature of the British negotiating posture had angered Sher Ali since the failure of the 1873 conference in Simla at which the British had rejected a formal defensive treaty against Russia yet requested the stationing of British officers in Afghanistan.³¹⁷ Added to this was the Seistan border commission of 1872 which had demarcated Afghan and Persian territorial possessions in Seistan, at the behest of both parties, yet resulted in an outcome that was viewed as favourable to Persia.³¹⁸ In addition, the British refusal to recognise Sher Ali's nominated heir Abdullah Jan, whilst speaking out on the Amir's political prisoners, notably the rebel chief Yakub Khan, demonstrated British duplicity. The Amir was known to have excerpts of the *London News* read to him in court which only added to his suspicion.

³¹⁵ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 65-7.

³¹⁶ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 73-6.

³¹⁷ A previous conference at Ambala in north India between Sher Ali and the then Viceroy Lord Mayo had also demonstrated non-commitment on the British side. Thornton, A. P. 'Afghanistan in Anglo-Russian Diplomacy, 1869-1873, *Cambridge Historical Journal*, 11/2 (1954), 204-218.

³¹⁸ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 71-2. See also: Benjamin Hopkins, 'The bounds of identity: The Goldsmid mission and the delineation of the Perso-Afghan border in the nineteenth century', *Journal of Global History*, 2 (2007), 233-54.

The low value that appeared to be afforded to Anglo-Russian relations, as well as reported Anglo-Russian diplomacy over Central Asia appeared to demonstrate great power collusion over the status of Afghanistan.³¹⁹ This fear was only added to when Sher Ali's cousin, who was living in London, wrote to him on a book he had read by a 'great man' which argued for the annexation of Herat and Kandahar in the event of a Russian move on Merv. The book was the reissue of Rawlinson's articles.³²⁰

The outcome of the Peshawar meeting in 1876 was a draft agreement that was delivered to the Amir in terms that resembled an ultimatum. The Amir was instructed that if he did not accept the concessions 'the Viceroy would be free to adopt his own course in his rearrangement of the frontier relations without regard to Afghan interests'.³²¹ In truth, the Viceroy continued with these rearrangements regardless, rooted in the move towards a 'scientific frontier'. The signing of a treaty with Kalat in late 1876 gave the British the option of stationing troops in Quetta which would allow defence of the Bolan Pass. Meanwhile troops were moved closer to the Indus and the river was bridged at Attock. Both of these moves Sher Ali took as a direct threat to his authority.³²²

The reception of the draft agreement at the Kabul *darbar* was reported unfavourably by the *vakil*. The Amir declined to accept the terms of the draft yet agreed to a further meeting in February 1877 at Peshawar. In light of British moves elsewhere on the Indus these discussions were conducted in an atmosphere of deep mistrust. The British had bolstered their military moves on the Indus with a permanent troop presence at Quetta as well as a further garrison in the Kurram valley, thereby threatening Kabul and Jalalabad. Agents were also sent to Wakan and Chitral to improve relations, and influence was expanded in Kashmir.³²³ Lytton was establishing a

³¹⁹ Chakravarty, *From Khyber to Oxus*, 123.

³²⁰ Duthie, 'Pragmatic Diplomacy or Imperial Encroachment', 482-3; Chakravarty, *From Khyber to Oxus*, 166; Rawlinson, *England and Russia in the East*.

³²¹ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 75.

³²² Ewans, *Securing the Indian Frontier in Central Asia*, 67.

³²³ Chakravarty, *From Khyber to Oxus*, 171; IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 82.

'scientific' frontier. Meanwhile, reports began filtering in to frontier posts of agitation for religious war against the British. The Amir was engaged in protracted discussions with members of his court as the political ecology began to exhibit signs of a profound shift. As one report recorded:

[E]xtraordinary symptoms ... are observable in the Cabul Durbar; the troops look out of control or headstrong ... and some of Durbar officials, Chiefs and influential persons seem happy, and other appear in a depressed condition. Those who were never allowed an audience in Durbar seem exalted and honoured, and those who could never speak a word ... are now honourably received in private ... Of the bazaar people some express their readiness to take part in a religious war and others desire change of rulers. ... the state of affairs has become altered, and the temperament of the people is undergoing change. Every one looks to the arrival of a report from Peshawar.³²⁴

In the process of these protracted negotiations the chief Afghan envoy, Syed Nur Muhammad Shah died. Rather than wait for a new envoy to arrive, whom it was reported to the Viceroy, had been given permission to accede to British demands, Lytton instead instructed his chief negotiator to terminate the conference.

Anglo-Afghan relations were now in terminal decline. The *vakil* was instructed to withdraw from Kabul. Lytton became convinced that the Amir's authority was in a parlous state and would soon fall through sheer instability within the country. British officials began a campaign of agitation amongst the tribes of the frontier using the declaration of war by Russia against Turkey in April 1877 as a means to instigate disaffection against Sher Ali by associating him with Russia through his correspondence.³²⁵ Through merchant networks the British began recording favourable indications of their influence in the country. As one report noted, 'the Kazalbash [sic] tribes and the residents of the city of Cabul consider that perpetual peace is ensured under British rule, and they earnestly wish to see a British administration established in Afghanistan ... The elders of the people have

³²⁴NAI Foreign Department Proceedings 1876-1879, Secret Consultations, No. 155, letter IV, 1 February 1877; IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 84-5.

³²⁵ Chakravarty, *From Khyber to Oxus*, 179-180.

been divested of their ancient jagirs and powers, and are heart-broken'.³²⁶ Throughout 1877, the predicted fall of Sher Ali's authority did not come, but Lytton had become convinced through the apparently mutinous factions surrounding the Amir that it would be an easy task to disassemble the Afghan polity. This would allow the full realisation of the 'scientific frontier' with a strong military presence in Kandahar and Herat.

Meanwhile Russia was closing in on Constantinople, the fall of which the British viewed as a *casus belli*. War between Britain and Russia seemed imminent as the British occupied Cyprus and moved Indian troops to Malta. The Russians had agreed in advance that upon the entry of the British into the Russo-Turkish war they would attempt to antagonise Sher Ali against the British in India. The arrival of a Russian Agent in Kabul in July 1878, despite the protests of Sher Ali, was the leading edge of this new front. Hearing news of his arrival, the British lodged a complaint at St Petersburg. In August the Russian envoy was ordered back to Tashkent after the signing of the Berlin treaty that put an end to Russian-Turkish hostilities, although the majority of his mission remained in Kabul.³²⁷ The British meanwhile, were still awaiting a response to their protest. Despite this Lytton pressed on with restoring British influence. He first sent a minute to the members of the Cabinet and the Council of India outlining his arguments for a stronger line of defence 'along the Hindu-Kush from the Pamir to Bamian, holding the northern debouches of the principle passes; and thence southwards by the Helmund, Girishk, and Candahar to the Arabian sea'.³²⁸ He then dispatched his own mission to Kabul on 21 September, against the wishes of London, demanding its entry into the country. The mission was turned back at the Khyber Pass. Lytton continued to urge Cabinet on the need to at least restore political influence. At the end of October he was given permission by London to issue an ultimatum to the Amir demanding a written apology, the acceptance of a permanent British mission, and the independence of the Khyber Pass, or face

³²⁶ IOR/L/PS/18/A19, 'Afghanistan', p. 85.

³²⁷ IOR/L/PS/18/A38, 'Russian Correspondence with Kabul', p. 25.

³²⁸ C. H. Phillips (ed.), *The Evolution of India and Pakistan 1858 to 1947, Select Documents* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 454.

military invasion.³²⁹ The ultimatum was sent on 2 November, receiving no reply, the order to advance was given on 21 November. On 30 November, Sher Ali's reply arrived – he had refused to comply with the ultimatum.

³²⁹ Chakravarty, *From Khyber to Oxus*, 208.

Conclusion: The Era of Exception

Anglo-Russian relations played a prominent part in the wider political setting that created the conditions for the Second Anglo-Afghan war in 1878, but the signing of the treaty in Berlin removed the immediate need for invasion on geopolitical grounds, and indeed made non-intervention of greater importance so as not to inflame relations once more. The reaction of Lytton's superiors demonstrated their views on the ill-judgement of such a campaign.³³⁰ The histories of this period reveal a belligerent Viceroy, a divided cabinet, and a prevaricating Foreign Secretary. But whilst the diplomatic minutiae of the decision to go to war reveals much of the individual decisions that led to war, this chapter has sought instead to locate the decision in the wider cultural, intellectual, and political trends in the management of the north-west frontier of India.

It is not sufficient explanation to simply put the Second Anglo-Afghan War down to an imperial urge. Since the 1850s the British had been increasingly comfortable with the concept of 'imperial' policy, but this does not give content to this desire. This chapter has argued that Lytton was operating in a permissive environment brought about by two crucial conditions. First was the concept of the 'scientific frontier' which reduced Afghanistan to a problem of imperial defence, and removed the need to consider the intricate nature of Afghan politics as a means of political influence. Second was the prevailing view of Afghanistan as an 'uncivilized' barbarous state which was effectively exempt from the considerations of international legal provisions due to its internal and cultural attributes.

In response to a September 1878 minute sent by Lytton outlining his plans, which had elicited some resistance from the Cabinet and the Council of India, Rawlinson issued a telling rebuke:

³³⁰ As Disraeli noted, 'by disobeying orders, [he had] only secured insult and failure'. Ewans, *Securing the Indian Frontier in Central Asia*, 73.

... it is mere affectation to pretend to apply the nice distinctions of European diplomacy to our relations with a barbarian Chief like Shir Ali Khan. To hold that he is an independent Prince, bound by no obligations to the British Government, and free to contract or refuse alliances as he pleases, is to ignore the true bearing of the case ... in the relations of the great European Powers with the half civilised Chieftains of the East, the fine drawn distinctions of Western international law are brushed aside as mere cobwebs when substantial and Imperial interests intervene; and there is this to be said in favour of such a high-handed course, that an honest deference to other considerations would be misunderstood by orientals and be attributed to weakness.³³¹

Rawlinson was not alone in these views. Contributing to the debate in *The Times* the prominent jurist Sir James Fitzjames Stephen wrote: 'there is no law by which the case between Shere Ali [sic] and ourselves can be tried. We are exceedingly powerful and highly civilized; he is comparatively weak and half barbarous. He cannot be permitted to follow a course of policy which may expose us to danger. We are to be the judges of the cause, and we are to decide according to our own interests.'³³²

In addition to this intellectual bedrock was the impact of a particularly vocal military epistemic community, whose 'scientific' approach to frontier defence provided a pre-formed vehicle for the expansive policies of the Governor-General. Adding weight to this movement was a growing sense of the possibility to 'civilize' what had often been viewed as a population beyond redemption. Here the sentimental aspects of the 'frontier state of mind' were most obvious. This missionary zeal had a much longer history and much deeper cultural heritage than has been discussed here, but on the frontier it

³³¹ IOR/L/PS/18/A20, 'Note on Minute by the Viceroy', H. C. Rawlinson, 4 September 1878, p. 1.

³³² BL W3/3695, Earl of Northbrook, 'The Afghan Question', Speech at the Guildhall, Winchester, 11 November 1878, p. 5.

merged with a powerful reforming spirit, given credence by what appeared to be a rational, systemic approach to frontier management.

If the British gradually lost the ability to speak in the language of South Asian politics throughout the nineteenth century, as Benjamin Hopkins summarises,³³³ then this was a language over which they only ever exhibited a slender grasp. It was a language heavily driven by their own ideas and prejudices, but accented by a tenuous and tendentious understanding of local conditions. But the forgetting of this language meant beginning to speak another. This chapter has argued that this new dialogue was far more introspective, on the one hand an expression of internal administrative anxieties and disputes, on the other an expression of curious narcissitic tendency in which the 'character' of British imperial rule was subject to examination. The frontier debate drifted from the prejudice and violent geography of the post-1842 era, to a more imperialist debate, driven in large part by the formalizing influence of bureaucratic competence, and the positivist epistemology of a 'scientific' approach to the conduct of public affairs. This inevitably moved the 'expert' community away from the rather more improvised and subjective dialogue of early nineteenth century colonial knowledge.

To the extent that colonial knowledge entered the debate it was for the purposes of justifying the need for a civilizing influence, an argument often couched in terms of 'character' and 'nature'. In its place, the predominant new military science allowed a language that all participants could become competent in, and many already were, as graduates of the new professional schools of military education. It was a language that created an illusion of control, and placated the ambiguities of Afghan politics and society. This new aspect to colonial knowledge did not require a process of policy application in order to refine it into digestible form; it came preformed in the categories of the policy debates it informed.

³³³ Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

This thesis set out to achieve two principal goals: to recover Anglo-Afghan relations from what has been described as the oblivion of great power politics, and to further contribute to the insights that imperial history can offer the IR discipline. In conclusion this chapter considers the findings of this work with respect to these aims using the three themes outlined in the introduction of 'knowledge', 'policy', and 'exception', and offers some reflections on the contemporary relevance of this study to international intervention in Afghanistan today.

Knowledge

The arrival of European explorers in Afghanistan at the beginning of the nineteenth century marked the overture to a renewed era of European engagement with Afghanistan. These adventurers, officials, military men, itinerants, and scholars carried with them their own cultural and intellectual baggage that informed their observations. By focussing on their activities, their publications, and their formation of what has been termed a 'knowledge community', this work has shifted forward the conventional narrative of Anglo-Afghan relations which tends to begin with the First Anglo-Afghan War. The activities and works of these early explorers, as well as their impact on policy, is generally overlooked in existing histories, in favour of the more dramatic story of Anglo-Russian rivalry. Yet as recent scholarship is increasingly showing, the 'great game' narrative offers little by way of insight into the development of British understandings of Afghanistan itself at this time. Colonial frontiers rarely expanded blindly, and the knowledge that this

community provided informed the imperial gaze as it looked out beyond its existing territories. The manner in which the colonial state 'saw' was mediated through these individuals and their cultural and intellectual worldviews, but this epistemic baggage was not totalizing. These European explorers were parasitic upon their hosts. Their observations were determined to a significant extent by the people with whom they were inclined to interact with, and were able to interact with. This encounter on the periphery of the colonial state was to an extent, in the initial stages at least, a dialogue.

A principal goal of this thesis has been to contribute to the growing literature that has sought to rectify of what has been described as the 'wilful forgetting'¹ of empire within IR and the overlooking of the nineteenth century more generally.² By focussing attention on the accumulation and use of colonial knowledge this thesis has explored a new avenue for research within this 'imperial turn'. Chapter two showed how this knowledge demonstrated a capacity to produce, for European observers, a 'normative conception' of the Afghan polity, linking authority, territory, and population into a coherent narrative.³ Colonial knowledge, in this respect, was a site for the colonial political imagination and a venue for the construction of the 'idea of Afghanistan' in the colonial mind. But the dialogic aspect to the encounters that crafted this idea, demonstrates that the presumption that European political ideals were simply projected into the non-European space is not the case. The process of imagining Afghanistan was in part the process of transculturation.⁴ Those at the receiving end of this process had the opportunity to talk back and this, in turn, was socialized into the normative and conceptual universe of these European observers.

¹ Vitalis, 'Birth of a Discipline', 160; Duncan Bell, 'Writing the World: Disciplinary history and beyond', *International Affairs*, 85/1, (2009), 8.

² Barry Buzan and George Lawson 'The global transformation: the nineteenth century and the making of modern international relations', *International Studies Quarterly*, (Forthcoming, available online: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/44894/>).

³ Bierstecker and Weber, *State Sovereignty as Social Construct*.

⁴ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 7.

With this said, it is important not to claim too much for colonial knowledge. The work of these individuals was often amateurish, frequently prejudiced, and always limited in its scope. The power of colonial knowledge derived not from its capacity to capture social reality in its multiple dimensions, but in its ability to speak directly to the colonial elite. In a similar sense, it is important not to elevate to too great a height the capacity of the 'colonial state' to imbibe this knowledge and act upon it. The *modus operandi* of these early accumulators of Afghanistan knowledge was just as tribal as the communities they purported to understand. Their capacity to influence and inform policy sprung more from their proximity to the fraying ends of colonial authority in this region than from their part in some form of all-pervasive monolithic imperial entity. However, their shared endeavours on the fringes of the East India Company territories, and their relative scarcity did encourage the pooling of knowledge, and the sharing of views. In this sense, we can speak of an Afghanistan colonial knowledge community, one whose opinions and works were incorporated into the thinking of key decision-makers.

Policy

As James C. Scott reminds us, societies that are relatively opaque to the state can be insulated, to some degree, from certain forms of state intervention. In such instances '[t]he interventions it does experience will typically be mediated by local trackers who know the society from inside and who are likely to interpose their own particular interests.'⁵ Chapter three looked at such 'trackers' in more detail by considering the influence of the Afghanistan knowledge community on the policy decisions that led to the First Anglo-Afghan War. To varying degrees, these individuals and their works were socialised into the policy-making community of the EIC during the 1830s. European explorers were therefore instrumental in crafting a 'regime of legibility'⁶ for the colonial state. In this sense, the 'idea of Afghanistan' developed into a new form of official knowledge. This was always a partial

⁵ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 78.

⁶ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.

model, stymied by the prejudices and weaknesses of the knowledge upon which it drew, and inescapably shaped towards the policy agenda it sought to inform. Moreover, as chapter three demonstrates, the crisis moment of the First Anglo-Afghan War served to enact a process of 'closure' upon this model. Certain core narratives concerning the political history of Afghanistan, and its social structure began to take hold. In certain cases, for example the case of the Barakzai/Saddozai schism, these narratives became received wisdom. Once again, it is important not to claim too much for colonial knowledge and its capacity to shape policy prescriptions, but without paying attention to this body of understanding, explanations for the manner in which the British chose to intervene in 1838 can only go so far.

Contrary to received wisdom, the British were not completely ignorant of Afghanistan prior to their intervention, but their knowledge was extremely limited, both in terms of their connections with collaborators within Afghanistan, and in terms of the impact of their own worldviews on the little knowledge that they had developed. In addition, in chapter three we saw how government structures themselves served to induce a warping effect on the perception of certain policy problems. In the nineteenth century, Britain was not only facing new foreign policy challenges in India, but it was evolving in the manner in which it dealt with these problems. In the period preceding the First Anglo-Afghan War, the East India Company was becoming marginalised by the Crown. Britain was beginning to act in a more deliberate way as a global power. The British Government in India was beginning to develop its own foreign policy as an 'Asiatic power'. This necessitated a period of adjustment that raises interesting questions relating to 'ontological security'.⁷

Whilst the British may have been an Asiatic 'power', they were not necessarily an Asiatic 'state' – and certainly not in the contemporary sense. In

⁷ Mitzen, 'Ontological Security in World Politics'; Mitzen, 'Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity: habits, capabilities and ontological security'; Steele, 'Ontological security and the power of self-identity: British neutrality and the American Civil War'.

addition, whilst it had become fashionable to speak of Britain's 'empire', acts of 'imperialism' were generally used to refer to the 'purportedly despotic municipal politics of France'.⁸ This began to change in the 1870s, but the observation is a reminder that the capacity for 'identity' to generate constitutive effects - or in other words the capacity for actors to determine what they want based on who they are, and to interact with others based on this identity - must appreciate that this identity is not fixed. Imperial history, and the evolution of the colonial state provides intriguing case studies in this respect. As chapter three further demonstrates, the construction of 'threat' was partly location-specific. Whilst London was more fixated on geopolitical concerns and Russia in particular, Calcutta was more preoccupied with regional issues, including rivalries between local powers, internal threats, 'rumour', and most importantly, trade. Despite this, exchanges between centre and periphery had the capacity to create new understandings of policy problems at the 'contact zones' of colonial administration.

By adopting a more local perspective in the study of Anglo-Afghan relations in the period preceding the First Anglo-Afghan War, this study has surfaced a previously underdeveloped aspect of this relationship. Alongside colonial knowledge, and the regime of legibility that was provided by advisors such as Burnes and Masson, the British spent much of the 1830s quietly observing, and occasionally interfering in Afghan political developments. As we saw in chapter three, this period encompassed the various attempts made by Shah Shuja to reclaim his throne. These efforts, and the close relationship that developed between the British and Shuja's coterie also served to shape British perceptions of legitimate Afghan government. The tenuous nature of the information system that the British had established in the north-west during the 1830s was ameliorated in part by their contact with such exiles as Shah Shuja. When the British came to consider an alternative to Dost Muhammad Khan, the exiled former ruler was able to warp British perceptions in favour of his dynastic authority in an example of 'epistemic

⁸ Bell, 'Victorian visions of global order: An introduction', 5.

insurgency'.⁹ This is an overlooked part of the explanation for why Claude Wade, the political officer at Ludhiana, felt the need to warp Burnes' dispatches from Kabul. Similarly, Burnes' time in Kabul led to his encountering a number of disaffected communities, notably the *Qizilbash*, who on the one hand presented a potential threat as a Persian proxy, and on the other presented a potential facilitator for a return to Saddozai rule under Shah Shuja. The capacity of these indigenous communities to exploit the presence of outsiders to their own ends, and to warp their views in a deliberate manner, offers much in terms of recovering local agency, and is worthy of more research in the Afghan context.

Exception

As with the period preceding the First Anglo-Afghan War, the period after this war has escaped scholarly attention. Chapter four sought to recover this history. To the extent that Anglo-Afghan relations are covered in the literature, it is generally in a manner that presents Afghanistan as distinctly a no-go area for the British. Whilst this was certainly the case for much of the 1840s, this sense of exception was productive in itself of a 'violent geography' feeding off the memories of the First Anglo-Afghan War, and shaping British perceptions of the Afghan space. Partly this was a perception sustained by the feeble information sources they possessed. A series of 'information panics', normally surrounding rumours of marauding tribes, ensured that the British remained comfortable in their view of the Afghans as violent collective. Added to this was the innate bias of the frontier officers through whom this information came, and who projected their prejudice of the frontier tribes beyond the passes.

The consolidation of the frontier under military rule following the Anglo-Sikh wars created to an extent, a sense of security for colonial officials, and reduced the imperative to expand beyond their boundaries. This allowed a

⁹ Walsh, 'Political Epistemic Insurgency, Political Movements and the Refounding of the State'.

tentative recovery of diplomatic intercourse between Kabul and Calcutta, but one that remained stunted by British prejudice, and mutual fear. Chapter four provides a reminder that for empires, the 'frontier' exists as a distinct geographic unit,¹⁰ not necessarily a territorially delimited unit – at least not in a cartographic sense – but an 'imagined geography', more of a locational concept. This observation highlights a further area of research for IR scholars that offers an opportunity to escape the 'territorial trap'¹¹ and consider the role of alternate forms of political community in world politics. In the case of the north-west frontier of India, this locational concept attracted an aura of mystique, of danger, and of intrigue; one that arguably persists to this day.

Taming this imaginative knowledge in the 1850s were the processes of professionalization that reformed the military and civil service in this period. Afghanistan itself became subject to a new techno-cultural mediation that included the notion of the 'scientific frontier'; one that was 'part geographical, part ethnological'¹² but generally loosely defined. The 'scientific frontier' offered the illusion of control over a geographic space that continued to exert a powerful sway over the imperial imagination.

The argument that imperial competition in Central Asia was a precursor to the Cold War provides powerful sense of historical continuity but it misses a far more complicated history, and a far more revealing argument. Chapter four showed how in confronting the policy problem of their frontier the British were forced to accept the imperial urge in themselves as an 'empire', but they were also forced to recognize and accept that urge in Russia. A new discourse of 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' states encouraged this shared imperial vision and entailed a duty, upon the part of the ostensibly 'civilized' empire to tame the 'uncivilized' wilds. This promoted instances of great power collusion during this period, in stark contrast to the prevailing narrative of rivalry that often describes this era. In addition, these shared

¹⁰ Van Der Pijl, Kees, *Nomads, Empires, States: Modes of Foreign Relations and Political Economy, Volume I*, (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 76.

¹¹ Agnew, 'The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory'.

¹² Anderson, 'Politics and Poetics in Ethnographic Texts', 98.

imperial visions of global order perpetuated a divide in which the legal standing of 'uncivilized' states remained suppressed, and as a consequence, were permanently at risk.

Beyond the Great Game

Every generation writes its own history, and with respect to Afghanistan perhaps this generation is writing it from the perception of the current war. Nonetheless, many recent histories of Afghanistan's nineteenth century colonial encounter still prioritise Anglo-Russian rivalry. As such, these histories remain inflected by Cold War-era preoccupations with great power politics, and the sense that the great game was simply a precursor to this global conflict. It is time to move on from this narrative – not because it is wrong, but because it is only part of the story.

This thesis has demonstrated the relative analytical weakness of great power rivalries in explaining the nature of Anglo-Afghan relations during the nineteenth century. In many ways it was the inability of the British to read the Afghan polity that led to their fears for their own position in India. This raises a host of questions with contemporary relevance concerning the manner in which states understand regions they have little knowledge or insight into. Anglo-Russian relations mattered, and at times of crisis they were critical, but they did not matter all of the time, and they offer little insight into Anglo-Afghan relations in the interim. These periods have often evaded in-depth analysis, perhaps because they do not capture the drama of diplomatic *frisson*, but they are crucial in tracking the development of what was referred to in the introduction as the 'idea' of Afghanistan. These temporal spaces in between allowed narratives to take hold, they allowed intellectual trends to rise and become influential, and they allowed powerful institutions of thought and practice to establish their grip over diplomatic intercourse.

Imagining Afghanistan Today

After over a decade of international presence in Afghanistan it is easy to forget the sheer sense of intrigue and unfamiliarity that the country presented in late 2001. The BBC reporter John Simpson provides a telling reminder. On the eve of the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom, eleven days after the 9/11 attacks, Simpson and his cameraman were spirited across the border with Pakistan, by 'heavily armed smugglers' into Nangahar Province, 'becoming the only television reporter to broadcast from Taleban-held Afghanistan'. The brief account of his trip shows just how far beyond the pale the Afghan state was considered to be at this time.

On the advice of their escorts, the two men donned burqas - the traditional full-length garment compulsory for all women living in Taleban-controlled Afghanistan. ... Mr Simpson, who has reported from many of the world's trouble spots over the past 20 years, said the disguises worked "superbly", despite both of them being more than six feet tall. "Merely putting on the burqa, I found, has an extraordinary effect - it seems to make you disappear," he said.¹³

The representations of Afghanistan portray its archetypal status as an 'outlaw state'; a 'black world', 'silent and foreboding', yet 'at the crosshairs of manifest destiny'.¹⁴ Despite the 'heavy Taleban presence' Simpson reported on the "eerie emptiness" in the province they visited, as the local population were either 'keeping their heads down' or had already fled the anticipated US strike.

Given this apparent and actual sense of exclusion from Afghanistan, it is not surprising that Afghanistan 'experts' were a rare breed in 2001. As Barfield

¹³ 'Simpson smuggled into Afghanistan', BBC News (http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/september/22/newsid_4073000/4073858.stm, 22 September 2001).

¹⁴ Trevor Paglen, 'Groom Lake and the Imperial Production of Nowhere', 244.

commented on his chosen area of expertise, throughout the 1990s '[c]ritics of the university tenure system undoubtedly put me among those useless faculty who purveyed esoteric and irrelevant knowledge to the young without fear of termination. Wise policymakers had already determined that such remote places and people could be safely excluded from America's New World Order.'¹⁵ In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, policymakers gathered in those who were knowledgeable. Profiting from this renewed interest were the journalist Ahmed Rashid and the political scientist Barnett Rubin who both served as close advisors to the UN and the US State Department from 2001 onwards, and were key advisors over the Bonn Process in 2001 that led to a new Afghan constitution.¹⁶ Rubin would later serve as a Special Advisor to the Obama administration. Others, such as Rory Stewart, found themselves courted by high-ranking US officials including the former US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, who reportedly placed Stewart next to Hilary Clinton at one Washington event, instructing him to say 'exactly what you think. If you don't, I never - ever - want to hear you criticise the policy again.'¹⁷

The role of such experts in the formation of foreign policy today remains an under-researched yet intriguing area, not simply in terms of their actual influence, which is generally assumed to be minimal, but also in terms of the genesis of the peculiar form of knowledge that they propound.¹⁸ A contemporary study of the sociology of policy-relevant knowledge presents a gap in the literature, and is potentially an important gap in this era of academic 'impact' surveys. For Stewart, who has himself spoken out over the apparent lack of 'expertise' within the policy-making community, the

¹⁵ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, x.

¹⁶ Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos* (New York: Viking, 2008); Lucy Morgan Edwards, *The Afghan Solution* (London: Bactria Press, 2011), iv-v.

¹⁷ Stewart, Rory, 'Midnight Moments: Exposing the truth and taking full responsibility for Afghanistan', Huffington Post (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rory-stewart/post_1457_b_799063.html, 20 December 2010).

Manan Ahmad, 'Flying blind: US foreign policy's lack of expertise', *The National* (<http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/books/flying-blind-us-foreign-policys-lack-of-expertise>, 10 May 2011).

¹⁸ For an excellent study on Cold War-era Foreign Policy advisers see: Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

problem is not so much the absence of policy experts but the nature of their expertise and 'the new mass brand of international intervention' that they propound.¹⁹ From this perspective, foreign policy failure in situations such as the state-building projects in Iraq and Afghanistan are partly due to the flattening impact that a generic approach to such projects carries. According to this argument cultural, and linguistic expertise is overlooked as the Foreign Office seeks greater flexibility in its staffing and operating principles.²⁰

There appears to be some merit in this argument. The BBC reported in 2010 that in the previous five years the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office had trained just six staff in Pashto, the language spoken in Helmand, which was the site of the main UK military presence at the time. It had trained 34 staff in Dari. Of the 161 diplomats in Afghanistan at the time, just three spoke Dari or Pashto fluently.²¹ Such perspectives on policy-making today have in certain circles prompted a nostalgia for empire.²² The demands that counter-insurgency places on accurate 'cultural understanding' has only added to the perception that colonial 'small wars' somehow contain the lessons for success in campaigns such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq.

As this research has shown, this argument should be seriously questioned. In the first instance, as Manan Ahmed has pointed out, to argue for a more 'imperial' approach to the conduct of foreign policy is patently illogical. It is a suggestion that is morally, politically, normatively, and probably financially unsustainable in the modern era. But on a more practical level, arguing for a return to colonial-era cultural understanding simply reprises the illusion of 'knowledge'. Nineteenth century Afghanistan experts were just as partial to the intellectual fashions of their day, and to the cultural bias of their heritage,

¹⁹ Stewart, *The Places in Between*, 272.

²⁰ In a recent debate in the UK Parliament on the Iraq war, Rory Stewart laid out a similar argument. 'Iraq invasion was the 'worst foreign policy decision' since 1839 - MP', *BBC News* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/democracylive/house-of-commons-22891120>, 13 June 2013).

²¹ Ray Furlong, 'Knowledge of Afghanistan 'astonishingly thin', *BBC News*, 31 July 2010.

²² For example, the former UK Ambassador to Afghanistan, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, questioned in his memoirs 'whether, in an entirely benevolent sense, America had ... [the] qualities for successful empire-building'. Sherard Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul* (London: Harper Press, 2011), 285.

as we are today. Despite their longer periods 'in country', they were hidebound by the administrative structures they worked in; constrained by the policy goals they were instructed to achieve; and blinded by wider societal norms that often seem offensive to us today. In addition, cultural understanding may improve with time, but when this knowledge becomes adapted to a policy agenda, it *necessarily* becomes warped. This process seems inescapable. Understanding how this might happen requires an approach that is appreciative of the sociology of knowledge; of knowledge becoming, rather than simply being. This seems to be an insight that can inform policy as much as it can inform the discipline of IR.

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